Engaging Key Stakeholders:
A Review of Recent Research

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Introduction

Stakeholder engagement has gained increasing recognition as a crucial component of successful public health efforts. Effective planning and implementation in engaging stakeholders can lead to more meaningful and enduring outcomes in confronting health challenges. Current research on reaching and utilizing stakeholders indicates that innovative approaches to community health problems which incorporate stakeholders can produce more efficient and impactful programs.

Ongoing research by Kramer recommends developing a community action plan to engage diverse stakeholders as a critical component of attracting and mobilizing stakeholders to maximize program effectiveness.

Seeking to decrease inequities in health outcomes, Petkovic (2020) proposed a series of systematic reviews of stakeholder engagement models that can provide guidance for effective and equitable engagement of multiple stakeholders.

Investigating the experiences and viewpoints of stakeholders involved in public health efforts, Laird (2020) identified optimal strategies to catalyze positive engagement and successful collaboration.

Mallery (2012) reviewed stakeholder engagement literature and input from healthcare experts to pinpoint key emerging methods that can enhance an organization's efforts in engaging and utilizing stakeholders.

Evaluating the process and results of a virtual town hall addressing COVID-19 health challenges in the African American community, Fletcher (2020) described the efficacy of engaging stakeholders in pandemic heath responses through harnessing cross-disciplinary expertise, collaboration, and community education and outreach.

Article 1: Encouraging Involvement in Community Work (Chapter 7, Community Toolbox)

Summary

Generating a plan to attract membership among diverse stakeholders in community-based efforts is a key means of providing clear direction and actions that fulfill program goals (p. 1-2). Plan development should start by identifying members of local partnerships or coalitions—e.g., local government representatives, businesses, social service organizations, or religious groups—and/or individuals who can help recruit, organize, and/or give general support. Members who speak for whole groups are particularly helpful, because through their membership, an "organization will gain access to people who may help out at different levels" (p. 3-4).

Next steps involve targeting where the most useful new members can be found based on program goals, and dividing up recruiting tasks by people's particular strengths, talents, and assets. Timing is essential in recruiting new members, for example, when your organization is rallying around a particular project or new initiative or starting a publicity/fundraising campaign. Finding a hook or particularly persuasive angle to attract people to your specific project, cause, or problem is further useful. Developing a timeline and setting goals is also crucial and should recruit members before launching an effort (p. 5-6).

Approaching new members in a way that personalizes their particular interests and concerns is essential. **To successfully convince people to support an effort, "they need to feel they will get something out of it too: satisfaction, new skills, personal fulfillment, et cetera" (p. 8).** Community-action groups trying to attract new members should be attentive to giving them compelling reasons to join and must demonstrate that efforts will be not be disorganized and inefficient (p. 7-8).

Preparing for success is another key aspect of planning, so that a "yes" results in being able to tell a new member or organization what is needed of them. Keeping in touch with those who respond "maybe" is worthwhile because they may become interested in joining at a later date or getting involved in a different capacity. Furthermore, a "no" may not be final, and could instead mean "not right now," so that a later follow-up may result in finding they have changed needs or interests (p. 8-9).

Overall, developing a community action plan for increasing participation is crucial for success, and can be the difference between an organization flourishing or becoming irrelevant (p. 9).

Reference

Holt, C., Fawcett, S., Francisco, V., Schultz, J., Berkowitz, B., and Wolff, T. (2021). Community Toolbox. Available at https://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/participation/encouraging-involvement/increase-participation/main.

Article 2: Protocol for the Development of Guidance for Stakeholder Engagement in Health and Healthcare Guideline Development and Implementation

Summary

Seeking to improve health outcomes and reduce inequities in health, researchers proposed a series of four systematic reviews of stakeholder-engagement models. This initial stage in a broader engagement study will develop guidance for meaningful and equitable engagement of multiple stakeholders in guideline development and implementation (p. 1-2).

The first review's objective is to synthesize existing guidance in each step of the guideline development process, involving frameworks or processes that evaluate stakeholder engagement in guideline development. **These include methods for identifying stakeholders, engaging them at different stages of the process, measuring their frequency and level of engagement, and resolving differences in opinions/perspectives.** The expected outcome of the second review will be a summary of barriers and facilitators at each step of the guideline development process (p. 3-4).

To investigate conflict of interest issues when engaging stakeholders in guideline development, the third review will specifically assess: **types of conflicts and how they vary by group; whether conflicts of interest in selecting stakeholders to participate in the development of a guideline can affect that selection process; potential effects; and respective advantages and disadvantages in proposed and/or implemented approaches for managing conflicts (p. 5-6).**

The fourth review will gauge the impact of stakeholder engagement in guideline development, particularly on: the development process itself; guideline relevance, trustworthiness, acceptability; and the stakeholders and decision-makers themselves (p. 7-8).

In consultation with a consortium of academics, policymakers, clinicians, and funders, researchers will use the results of the four systematic reviews to develop a candidate list of recommendations to include in a final guidance paper, allowing guideline developers to "consider when and how to engage different stakeholders at each stage of the guideline development process," with equity considerations outlined at each step (p. 8-9).

Stakeholder engagement "should be multidirectional, meaningful, effective, and enable equity for both the stakeholders and the guideline developers throughout all steps in

the decision-making process" (p. 8). Overall, the project employs an inclusive, comprehensive, and equitable approach that ensures that the guidance developed "is representative and relevant for all stakeholders, including those who are involved in creating and implementing guidelines and those affected by recommendations developed within those guidelines" (p. 8-11).

Reference

Petkovic, J., Riddle, A., Akl, E. A., Khabsa, J., Lytvyn, L., Atwere, P., ... & Tugwell, P. (2020). Protocol for the development of guidance for stakeholder engagement in health and healthcare guideline development and implementation. *Systematic Reviews*, *9*(1), 1-11.

Article 3: Stakeholders' Experiences of the Public Health Research Process: Time to Change the System

Summary

This study explored the experiences and perspectives of stakeholders in public health efforts—academics, policymakers and practitioners—to understand their impressions of interacting with the research process and identify strategies to better enable positive engagement and effective collaboration (p. 1-2).

Study participants highlighted that careful planning, adequately resourced research, and an effective and communicative team were the main enablers of positive stakeholder experiences and engagement, and were central to generating high-quality, collaborative outcomes. Meaningful and cooperative interaction with non-academics was considered to play a critical role in ensuring that research is policy relevant, sensitive to local contexts and cultures, and findings are implemented (p. 3-4).

Significant challenges were also identified. **Participants reported that building and maintaining relationships was time consuming and difficult, there were conflicting priorities between practitioners and academics, and participants were often involved in research that neither benefited them nor understood their needs.** Impediments such as limited data sharing, a shortage of usable data, poor-quality research, and duplication of research efforts were also emphasized (p. 4-5).

Differing cultural perceptions of research, limitations in funding processes, and translating research into policy and practice presented further obstacles. **Academics reported difficulty demonstrating impact from their research, and non-academics noted a disconnect between research and application where research did not give new insights into practice.** Participants described clashing impressions of the quality of academic versus non-academic

research, uncertainty regarding how much involvement non-academics should have in the research process, and non-academic engagement hindered by a lack of time and funding (p. 5-7).

Suggestions to address these challenges included changing the funding system, adapting methodologies, putting evidence into action, and improving cooperation methods. **Funders could support non-academic involvement in research, methodologies could encourage collaboration by using approaches that meaningfully engage participants, and turning research into practice could be enhanced by identifying government needs, training postgraduates on impactful research, and creating roles that bridge the gap between stakeholders (p. 7-8)**

Lastly, identifying and developing sustainable approaches to enhance the research system must also recognize it as a complex system, which "interacts with and is influenced by multiple other systems, for example, funding, local and national government, and education systems" (p. 7-10).

Reference

Laird, Y., Manner, J., Baldwin, L., Hunter, R., McAteer, J., Rodgers, S., ... & Jepson, R. (2020). Stakeholders' experiences of the public health research process: time to change the system?. *Health Research Policy and Systems*, *18*(1), 1-10.

Article 4: Innovative Methods in Stakeholder Engagement: An Environmental Scan

Summary

Conducting a review of current literature and interviews with people experienced in stakeholder engagement within and outside of health care, **researchers synthesized recommendations for new and emerging methods that organizations may use to involve stakeholders—patients, practicing clinicians, consumers, payers, and others—in health care research and activities in related fields (p. 1-5).**

The review revealed key imperatives in implementing innovative activities: focusing on stakeholders that are most interested in and affected by an issue; communicating to stakeholders that their participation is important and helping them understand how their input will be used; tailoring the outreach and method of soliciting feedback to the specific stakeholder populations; and presenting data in a manner consistent with stakeholder needs (p. 17-22).

Researchers identified five priority methods to enhance the process of engaging stakeholders and stakeholders' ability to contribute meaningfully to the organization's activities:

1) **Online collaborative platforms** encourage interaction between an organization and its target audience by employing tools that allow users to communicate, share information, work together, and provide feedback while promoting transparency, participation, and collaboration.

2) **Product development challenges** invite an organization's target audience to submit ideas for improving or creating products, providing input on topics of interest and generating creative ideas for dissemination and implementation.

3) **Online communities** offer the benefit of mass, virtual associations where people communicate, share ideas, and cooperate, catalyzing the potential for an organization to expand and improve its current activities.

4) **Grassroots community organizing** uses a ground-up approach at the local level to facilitating interaction between organizations and target audiences, and can be helpful in spreading brand awareness, building trust, and contributing to the research and implementation processes.

5) **Collaborative research** combines stakeholders' specific knowledge, values, skills, and perspectives, incorporating them in the planning, development, and dissemination stages of the research process.

Additional recommendations for working effectively with stakeholders include: gaining and continuing to build trust throughout the engagement process; selecting stakeholders for whom the research has important consequences; preparing them for their role and responsibilities; providing resources or compensation to support their participation; utilizing technology when appropriate; employing trained and neutral facilitators; inviting them as early as possible; and giving them feedback on results and ways their input is being used (p. 26-29).

Reference

Mallery, C., Ganachari, D., Fernandez, J., Smeeding, L., Robinson, S., Moon, M., ... & Siegel, J. (2012). Innovative Methods in Stakeholder Engagement: An Environmental Scan. Prepared by the American Institutes for Research. Available at https://effectivehealthcare.ahrq.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/stakeholders-engagement-others_research-2012-1.pdf.

Article 5: COVID-19's Impact on the African American Community: A Stakeholder Engagement Approach to Increase Public Awareness Through Virtual Town Halls

Summary

        Due to persistent inequities, COVID-19 has disproportionately impacted African Americans. To increase COVID-19 awareness and dialogue among the African American community, the University of Alabama at Birmingham School of Public Health and the Housing Association of the Birmingham District convened a virtual town hall highlighting the importance of cross-disciplinary expertise, collaboration, and community education and outreach.

        Though changing COVID-19 guidelines have resulted in concerns by the American public in general, **the African American community has expressed unique concerns involving the spread of misinformation, skepticism surrounding susceptibility, and a lack of trust in non-black institutions, making the delivery of health information and messages by trusted and respected stakeholders critically important.** Responding to these challenges, the health segment of the town hall focused on COVID-19 prevention and symptomology, understanding chronic illness, and COVID-19's particular impact on the African American community. The faith and community segment emphasized resources available to the community, methods churches are using to engage congregations, and ways to cope with death and dying (p. 321-322).

        Outcomes of the town hall revealed three key lessons. **First, cross-disciplinary expertise and collaboration is essential, as confronting COVID-19 "requires knowledge and expertise from multiple disciplines (e.g. public health, medicine, community, and faith-based institutions) to provide comprehensive, accurate, and relevant information to the public"** (p. 321-323).

        Second, community education and outreach to engage communities during a pandemic is critical, especially via institutional support in communities burdened by persistent health and economic inequities (p. 321-323).

        Third, it is important to engage trusted sources to disseminate accurate information to communities, with African American pastors, health care providers, public health experts, and other community leaders well-positioned to deliver COVID-19 information through a range of communication channels (p. 322-323).

        The COVID-19 **pandemic "underscores the importance of long-standing academic/community partnerships to appropriately meet the needs of diverse communities in a crisis" (p. 323).** It further reveals the breadth and depth of social interconnections, and the need to work within existing networks to collectively and effectively meet public health crises (p. 323-324).

Reference

Fletcher, F. E., Allen, S., Vickers, S. M., Beavers, T., Hamlin, C. M., Young-Foster, D., ... & Erwin, P. C. (2020). COVID-19's Impact on the African American Community: a stakeholder engagement approach to increase public awareness through virtual town halls. *Health Equity*, *4*(1), 320-325.

Conclusion

This review aimed to provide an overview of relevant research on an important dimension of reaching prevention outcomes-- engaging key stakeholders in this process. This review pointed readers to an important prevention resource (i.e., the Community Toolbox), as well as highlighted important frameworks and documents that provided empirical findings on this topic.

The University of Kansas created the Community Toolbox to help community organizations figure out ways to plan, implement, and sustain purposeful initiatives. This article focused on the development of specific plans to attract, recruit, and retain key stakeholders, including asset-based identification of talent, and providing clear benefits to their participation.

Petkovic and colleagues (2020) created a framework to guide community-based organizations in the processes and practices of stakeholder engagement. This guidance document aimed to summarize and synthesize four important stakeholder engagement models.

In a study that aimed to investigate the perceptions and experiences of key stakeholders, including academics, policymakers, and practitioners, the authors found careful planning, adequately resourced research, and an effective and communicative team were the main enablers of positive stakeholder experiences and engagement, and were central to generating high-quality, collaborative outcomes. Laird et al (2020) also noted that a number of significant challenges were often reported during this process, including developing and maintaining relationships, conflicting priorities, and lack of meaningful benefit to participants.

Mallery and colleagues (2012) conducted a review of research, as well as interviewed participants active in the public health world, in order to make recommendations for best practices. This review found five activities that enhanced stakeholder engagement, including collaborative platforms; online communities; community organizing; and collaborative research.

Fletcher et al (2020) created a virtual town hall in order to identify significant factors in productive collaborations between stakeholders, finding that cross-disciplinary expertise and collaboration is essential, especially during a time of covid-19. These partnerships, such as

between higher education and the community, are critical to understand the needs of a community in crisis.

Author Information

Benjamin Gleason, PhD is the Director of Applied Research for the Prospectus Group. He earned a PhD in Educational Psychology & Educational Technology from Michigan State University, researching how to best support communities of learners through educational technology. He is now Assistant Professor of Educational Technology at Iowa State University. Before academia, Benjamin worked in youth and adult-serving learning spaces for almost fifteen years, from designing youth-initiated community service projects and teaching high school in Richmond, California, to working as a university instructor in Guatemala. Benjamin is also a founder of the Prospectus Group.

Tanner Brooks earned his BA in Political Science from Oberlin College and an MA (Distinction) International Studies and Diplomacy from the University of London School of Oriental and African Studies, where his thesis focused on examining the application of international human rights norms to the experience of child soldiers in Sierra Leone. He has a decade of experience in national and international activism, advocacy, and education, from working on political campaigns, nonprofits, and political action committees to writing and teaching politics and sociology as a professor in Tunisia. His recent work involves mentoring and tutoring teenage survivors of sex trafficking and providing counseling services at a suicide prevention call-line.