

Starting Strong: The Importance of Getting an Early Win

Congratulations! You've spent time building relationships with the right partners and your collaboration is off the ground! You are committed to working together to address a pressing behavioral health problem, and are confident that, working together, you can improve the health of your community.

But as an experienced prevention practitioner, you know that producing long-term, lasting change doesn't happen overnight. There is a long road from the time your collaboration first gets together to seeing the results of your efforts. Addressing entrenched attitudes toward underage drinking or implementing a comprehensive prevention plan takes time—time during which you may lose partners to competing priorities along the way.

So how can you keep your partners engaged for the long road ahead?

A Lesson from the Business World

Business leaders often debate the merits of “picking low-hanging fruit first.” In non-business language, that means tackling an easy problem before taking on a bigger one. The central question is: Do these early wins provide momentum for a team looking to solve bigger problems, or do they deflect from the greater cause?

Most prevention practitioners would argue the latter: that it's more important to commit limited resources and energy to tackling the big problems. But while it's important to always stay focused on the big picture, it's also critical to recognize the morale-building potential of starting small. In our zeal to tackle big health issues, we often miss the value of early successes in keeping members engaged in collaborative partnership for the long haul.

These early “wins” don't need to be groundbreaking. Instead, they should represent your collaboration's abilities to generate member investment in the group while moving toward larger, long-term goals.

Early Win Project: Four Categories

For new collaborations, early-win projects typically fall into four categories:

- **Projects that build identity.** The process of cultivating a distinct identity for your collaboration offers a great opportunity to get partners invested and involved right away. One way to build identity is to engage members in the process of choosing a name. Names go a long way in establishing legitimacy for any effort; your collaboration is no different. More importantly, the process of coming up with a name is likely to generate important conversations about what the collaboration is trying to accomplish and how members want it to be perceived by the outside world. In addition, having a name for your efforts increases the likelihood that your members will remain invested—after all, it’s a name they chose themselves!
- **Projects that strengthen connections among members.** Strong collaborations, like strong families, are built on relationships. For this reason, projects that provide opportunities for members to work together and begin establishing relationships with one another are good early wins. One easy way to do this is by supporting a project that one of your partners is excited about. For example, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, the city’s new prescription drug misuse coalition played an active role in supporting the police department’s initiative to place prescription drug drop-off boxes in each of its precincts. The project galvanized the newly formed coalition around a highly visible, tangible first project and established a norm of members supporting one another.
- **Projects that increase visibility.** The success of all coalitions ultimately hinges on the degree to which they are supported by the community. To this end, one of the first major tasks for a new collaboration is to find a way to introduce itself to the community, at large. While this task may seem daunting, it’s often one of the most satisfying. There are myriad ways of getting your collaboration’s name out there: the easiest is to participate in an existing community event. For example, one early-stage coalition working to reduce underage drinking in Needham, Massachusetts participated in a fundraiser to provide subsidies for students to use discounted limousine services to attend the high school prom. Through its involvement in this campaign, the coalition was able to increase its visibility in the community, overall, and among the parent population, specifically.
- **Projects that generate buzz.** Savvy collaboration leaders know how to use influencers and agents of change in the community to create enthusiasm and support for their activities. One coalition in Wakefield, Massachusetts did this by relying on a core group of community parents to spread word of their efforts through a series of “prevention coffee chats.” Parents convened and hosted the chats in their homes, and the coalition sent in health educators to discuss the prevalence of underage drinking in the community and answer parent questions. Over a few short months (and with minimal effort), the coalition had reached a large group of parents and increased awareness of the underage drinking issue (and the coalition!) in their community. Moreover, some of the parents who attended a chat eventually joined the collaboration.

Each of these efforts were concrete and time-limited. They were also instrumental in building the cohesion, connections, visibility, and enthusiasm needed to achieve the group’s long-term goals.