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Starter Guide to Implementing Population Health Strategies

*Six Steps to Developing and Implementing
a Collaborative Community Strategy*

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Introduction

The Importance of Implementing Population Health Strategies

The term “population health” can mean different things to different people. For some, population health involves targeting the highest-risk individuals among the patient population served by that organization and then organizing clinical teams to provide coordinated care, sharing clinical data, and improving teamwork across the continuum of care. David Kindig—who was influential in defining the term “population health” with Greg Stoddart in 2002—suggests in a recent article in *Health Affairs* that a better term to refer to the healthcare-based approach would be “population medicine” or “population health management” instead of Population Health.

In contrast, approaches that are focused on improving the overall health of populations bear a greater resemblance to the efforts of Public Health practitioners working to improve Community Health.

As Dan Buettner, author of the *Blue Zones* book stated recently, “People may get sick as individuals, but they get healthy as a group.” Or, as Dr. George Albee put it, “No epidemic has ever been resolved by paying attention to the treatment of the affected individual.”

The importance of addressing the health of communities, including the social factors that significantly impact health, continues to grow. As payment reforms continue to shift from fee-for-service to various value-based payment models, hospital leaders feel the pressure to work upstream and address community health. Leaders of organizations most closely involved with paying for the cost of poor health—such as insurance companies, employers, and government—are increasingly focusing on prevention to bring the cost of care under control.

Introduction - cont'd.

Public Health departments seeking accreditation are required to play a key role in leading the assessment of community health needs and then working with others in the community to address those needs via a Community Health Improvement Plan (CHIP).

Clarifying a definition of population health and agreeing on the importance of community-based prevention is a start, but the bigger challenge for most communities is successfully developing and then implementing strategies to achieve those desired improvements. During the past 15 years, countless communities have developed CHIPs, but the vast majority of them have struggled greatly with implementing those plans and achieving targeted improvements in health outcomes for their communities.

This Starter Guide introduces six key steps for improving the success of implementing population health strategies. These six steps were introduced by a chapter entitled, “Implementing Population Health Strategies” in the recent book, *Solving Population Health Strategies through Collaboration* (Routledge, 2017).

This Starter Guide provides actionable insights from the much more detailed chapter.

Step 1

Establish Urgency and Commitment to Collaborate on Select Health Issues

A well-established prerequisite for any successful large-scale change is urgency. Most people and organizations are busy, so it is unlikely they will invest the necessary effort to collaborate in a population health strategy if they don't see the urgency of action. It is important to clearly establish the “burning platform” that will make people realize that failing to act is more dangerous than the uncertainty and effort of investing in a solution.

Population health improvements could be more successfully implemented if typical Community Health Needs Assessment efforts were enhanced through improved collaboration, and with emphasis on the cost of *not* addressing the issue.

Collaboration

Most communities have multiple organizations that do needs assessments, yet they often do them independently. Increasing their collaboration in defining measures, doing surveys, engaging stakeholders in focus groups, and doing data analysis will save them time, improve the quality of the data, enhance analysis, and build a foundation for collaborative problem solving.

Cost

Analysis of health improvement priorities should extend beyond just the statistics of the health issue (e.g. the rate of obesity, tobacco use, or the levels of chronic disease) and include reasonable cost estimates for inaction of different groups within the community.

The more community stakeholders understand that they will be paying a heavy price if current trends continue, the more motivated they will feel to become part of the community coalition working on solutions.

Step 2

Introduce New Concepts, Techniques, and Tools for Managing Community Strategy

Once there is a shared understanding of the problem's urgency and the need for strong teamwork to address specific priority health issues in a community, the next step is to establish support for adopting the concepts, techniques, and tools necessary for higher level collaboration. Few communities working on collaborative strategies have created anything close to the broad teamwork necessary to achieve the outcomes to which they aspire.

While some progress can be made if many different organizations each make individual efforts toward a shared community goal, the real power of collaboration is harnessed when organizations combine their efforts and resources in mutually beneficial and mutually reinforcing ways. This makes it possible to achieve more than the sum of their isolated efforts.

When there is an intentional shift from striving to find an evidenced-based program to implement (looking for the silver bullet) towards focusing on enhancing community teamwork and collaboration, the community should also recognize it may need to adopt new ways of working together. The following are critical elements of community-oriented collaborative population health improvement plans:

Collective Impact

This approach, originally described in a Winter 2011 issue of the *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, has gained momentum and awareness in recent years, shifting the thinking of many people and funders.

In addition to a growing body of knowledge on Collective Impact, other approaches such as Asset-Based Community Development and the Community Balanced Scorecard methodology offer additional valuable insights for the field.

Step 2 - cont'd.

In their Winter 2015 article in the *Stanford Social Innovation Review* on The Dawn of System Leadership, Peter Senge, John Kania and Hal Hamilton stated that we are “at the beginning of the beginning in learning how to catalyze and guide systemic change at a scale commensurate with the scale of problems we face...” Leaders of population health strategies should seek to improve collaboration by building on the Collective Impact concept with new techniques and tools that have demonstrated value in other successful coalitions.

A Shared Strategy Map Framework

When working to harness the collaborative power of a diverse coalition, it is essential to have a common agenda. An effective common agenda should go well beyond an agreement on a few priority issues. Stakeholders should collaborate to develop a robust strategic framework within which different community stakeholders can organize themselves according to their unique strengths. Instead of using techniques such as linear logic models and specific work plans, which are designed to evaluate isolated programs, community coalitions should start by co-creating a Strategy Map framework that will provide structure for the rest of the journey.

Strategy Map design techniques have their roots in the Balanced Scorecard Methodology developed by Robert Kaplan and David Norton in the 1990s. Given how long it takes to build consensus and to implement changes that significantly improve population health outcomes, a well-designed strategy must be articulated in a way that will not need to change every year. If the strategy consists primarily of short-term actions, then the strategy will likely need to be re-created annually, wasting time and disrupting efforts to create bigger, more durable changes.

Population Health Strategy Maps are built as an enduring but flexible framework that separates Objectives—the building blocks of the strategy map—from the measures, targets, and actions that are also part of the strategy management system. Objectives describe specific changes, but don't specify how those changes will be measured. Rather than trying to quantify each of the multitude of actions that go into the strategy, the measures within Population Health Strategy Maps are used to monitor progress towards achieving the strategic Objectives, allowing for a simpler, more powerful management system.

Step 2 - cont'd.

New Technologies that Enable Efficient and Effective Collaboration

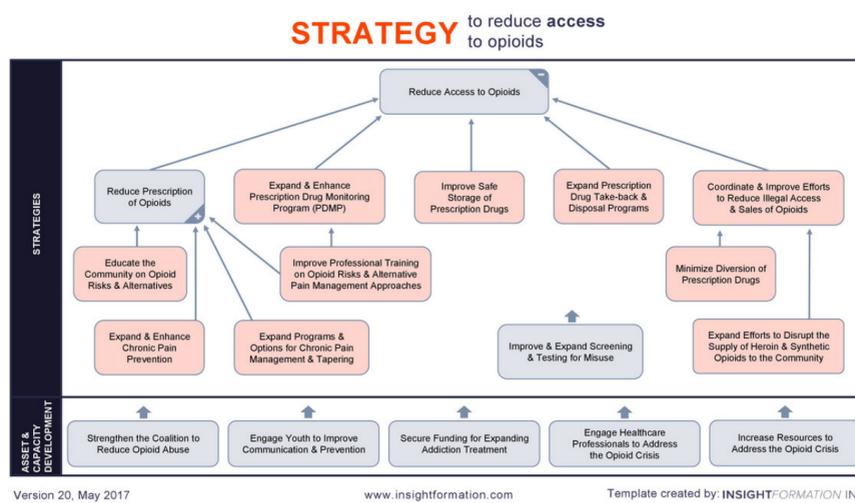
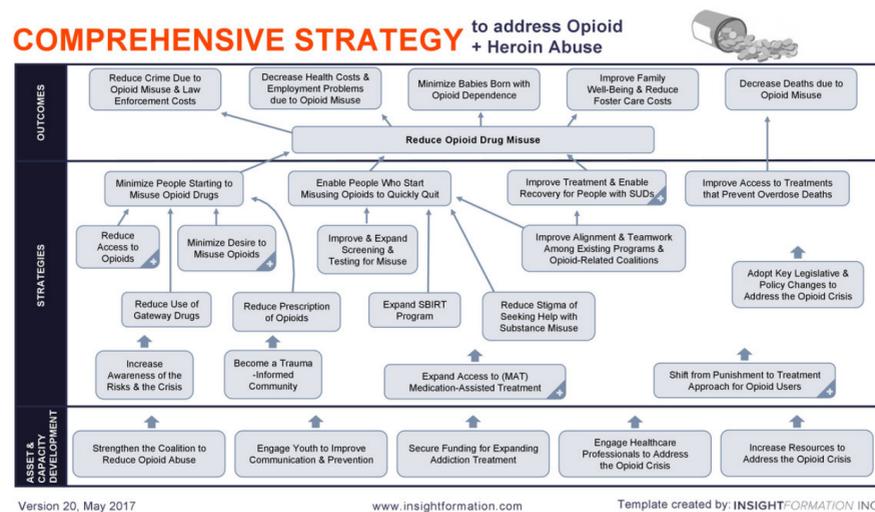
The amount of information involved in addressing complex community health issues through collaboration tends to overwhelm coalitions, even if they are highly motivated to achieve the change. Three underutilized technologies can significantly enhance the capacity of coalitions to successfully manage the flood of information.

(1) *A Strategy Management and Measurement system* can simplify continuous communication and collaboration within a large coalition.

(2) *A Community Care Coordination platform* enables improved teamwork around a multi-faceted success plan for an individual or household. A Community Care Coordination system manages individual and household-level data that must be HIPAA compliant. Ideally, the platform would also extend beyond clinical information and care providers to include resources and information for addressing social factors that impact health—like access to transportation, housing, education, job skills, and healthy food.

(3) *Shared Knowledge platforms* can enable local coalitions to have the most relevant national information at their fingertips. An example of this is the **Opioid Coalition Resource Hub**.

Communities that simultaneously make use of the Collective Impact approach, a shared Strategy Map framework, and valuable supporting technologies will be better positioned to develop and implement population health improvement strategies that achieve significant results.



Step 3

Engage the Coalition in Co-Creating a Strategy Map

Once a common agenda has been established, coalition leaders should engage a diverse team in developing a Strategy Map.

Structure and Process

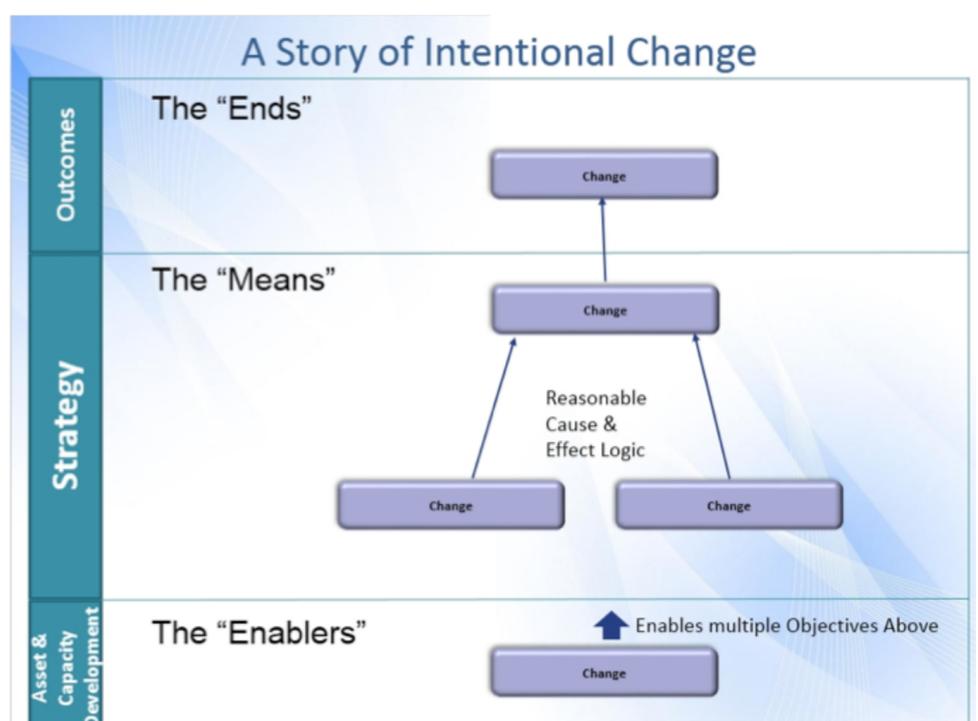
Community Health Strategy Maps are often organized into three layers (called “Perspectives”) with a general cause-and-effect logic flowing from bottom to top:

- *Outcomes*
- *Strategies*
- *Asset and Capacity Development*

Each of these layers contains a series of Objectives. The Objectives in the Outcome Perspective might include “Reduce Obesity” or “Minimize the Prevalence of Diabetes.” The Objectives in the Strategy Perspective might include “Expand Community Gardening” or “Improve Infrastructure for Biking and Walking.”

Achieving the Objectives in the Strategy Perspective should lead to achieving the Objectives in the Outcomes Perspective.

The Asset and Capacity Development Objectives might include “Strengthen the Community Health Improvement Coalition” or other changes that will improve the community’s capacity to implement the Objectives in the Strategy Perspective.



Step 3 - cont'd.

As described previously, the Strategy Map should focus on *changes* that the community will be working to achieve, not just current actions or ongoing operations.

The order in which the elements of a strategy management system are created is very important. It is best to build consensus on the framework of Objectives (the Strategy Map) before wrestling with the details of measures, targets, and actions. Establishing a consensus on the Objectives makes it easier to reach agreement on the subsequent steps that organizations will take to measure and implement the strategy. These steps can be delegated to different groups after Objectives are in place.

Tame the Complexity with “Zoomability”

The strategic framework can be made more manageable by creating “zoomable” Strategy Maps. Online maps and GPS systems enable people to work with massive amounts of information by allowing them to zoom in and out to different levels of detail. This zoomability allows people to choose the level of detail they are interested in, without being overwhelmed or distracted by extraneous information.

Similarly, Strategy Maps should be designed—either using advanced features of PowerPoint® or a platform like InsightVision—to be zoomable so stakeholders can focus on subsets of the overall population health strategy. Examples of zoomable strategy maps can be found [here](#).

Step 4

Distribute the Work of Strategy Execution

To achieve the mutually-reinforcing changes that comprise the strategy, it is important to distribute the workload among multiple working groups that can focus on subsets of the overall plan. The use of well-designed Strategy Maps and strategy management techniques can help organizations avoid being overwhelmed by complex population health issues. Once stakeholders reach reasonable consensus on the Strategy Map framework, working groups can begin, in parallel, implementing the strategy, starting with the following:

- Encourage other organizations in the community to align their work with the new framework
- Establish a “lead advocate” for each Objective
- Define a “From-To Gap” that clarifies the current state, the desired state, and the gap between those states.
- Identify current efforts already under way to help close the gap and explore ways to enhance those efforts with improved community teamwork.

It is helpful for each team to follow a similar process for refining, communicating, and implementing their Objectives. If the teams use shared tools, they can easily access and understand the information being used by other working groups.

Without an efficient way of managing the complexity of a robust strategy, funders and community leaders sometimes struggle to understand all of the details, and may slow down or narrow the scope of the strategy to something they can keep track of in their heads. This limits the community’s ability to implement a comprehensive strategy that is capable of achieving the desired outcomes.

With a high-level Strategy Map that shows the big picture, accompanied by a software that enables stakeholders to zoom in and see supporting details, funders and leaders can have greater confidence that the strategy will be successfully implemented.

Step 5

Adopt Shared Strategy Measures and a Shared Measurement System

In working with many communities and coalitions, we have seen that the topic of measurement is a major source of stress and frustration. As funders increase their demands for good measurement, most communities struggle with how to best design, manage, and use measurement to improve collaboration and achieve greater rates of success. To reduce stress and improve the value of measurement, we recommend communities seeking to implement population health strategies adopt the following four changes to common measurement practices.

Shift from Measuring Actions to Aligning Actions to Impact a “Driver Measure”

Communities struggling to implement health improvement plans often try to establish measures of success for each action they undertake. This imposes significant burden on the coalition to precisely define and gather data for a large number of measures, and generate reports.

The sheer number of measures tends to overwhelm everyone (including those requesting reports). Instead of emphasizing success measures for each individual action or program, it is more effective to focus on community strategy measures that monitor key drivers, each of which is bigger than the work of any one organization or program.

For each high-level outcome measure, there are typically two to four of these community strategy (driver) measures, each of which can be impacted more quickly and more easily than the high-level outcome measures. After identifying these measures, the coalition should then set target levels for these measures that, if achieved, would likely result in hitting the target for the high-level outcome measure. Intentional, proactive, and collaborative efforts to move shared driver measures toward their targets are what make community strategy management so powerful.

Step 5 - cont'd.

One of the main advantages of using Strategy Maps is that they provide a set of strategic Objectives (drivers) that are seen by the coalition as sufficient to achieve the ultimate outcome of the strategy. The measures for these Objectives become valuable tools for managing community-wide collaboration to achieve outcomes.

When the use of measurement shifts in this way, the costs and burdens of maintaining the measurement system drop dramatically. Community organizations are then able to see measurement as a positive tool for teamwork, rather than an instrument that will be used to punish them for things beyond their control.

Move Beyond Operational Measures and Performance Improvement to Measure Progress on Strategic Change

Kaplan and Norton's Balanced Scorecard methodology is the most advanced, well-researched, and effective body of work that exists on strategy execution and measurement. These two experts begin their fifth book, *The Execution Premium*, with a very important statement: "Managing strategy differs from managing operations."

They likely opened the book with this statement because experts in operational performance management were misapplying the measurement techniques of operational performance improvement to strategy management.

Performance Improvement methodologies (like Six Sigma) work well for managing the improvement of an ongoing and repetitive process, but they work poorly for managing strategy implementation for a coalition that is trying to achieve transformational change and solve complex, long-term community challenges. Applying an operational approach to measurement will create a variety of problems when trying to develop a measurement strategy for implementing population health. For example, if a methodology begins by gathering operational data on a population health issue such for which data is not widely available or legally shared (e.g. "reduce the Negative Impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences"), the effort to make improvements will get bogged down trying to gather a valid set of initial data.

Countless efforts to improve community health have stalled because stakeholders believed the first step was to gather data for analysis, but the community was unable to figure out how to obtain the necessary data.

An operational approach to measurement also tends to focus on collecting data on current efforts—how many patients are being served, how many referrals were recently made, or how many people attend the training sessions—without regard to the changes the strategy is attempting to make. In recent years, there has been major emphasis on measuring outcomes, like diabetes rates or infant mortality rates.

Step 5 - cont'd.

Measuring outcomes is important, but just measuring outcomes is insufficient to create the teamwork necessary to improve them. Adding measures that focus on monitoring progress of key drivers will create a much more powerful measurement system that allows a community to manage strategy for achieving breakthrough change.

Shift from an Emphasis on Evaluation and Accountability to an Emphasis on Strategy and Teamwork

It is not enough to merely change the measurement approach and define a better set of measures. The leadership's mindset about how the measures are used should also change.

Over-emphasizing accountability can make potential partners hesitant to collaborate because of the burden of data collection and the risk of being held accountable for something that they don't feel they can control. In contrast, emphasizing a co-created strategy creates positive motivation for others to become part of the team and make improvements in areas they care about as an organization and as community members.

Shift from Fragmented and Isolated Measurement Systems to a Shared Measurement System

Without a collaborative approach to measurement, organizations frequently spend substantial resources gathering data in their own isolated and fragmented ways.

Given that true population health improvement generally takes several years, the scattering of information into different “data silos”—many of which are abandoned and hard to access later—is very problematic. Without any “go-to” data source for important population health measurements and information on the progress of long-term strategies, each funder, researcher, or community leader will likely just create another manual and isolated “system” to accomplish a narrow goal.

Efficiency can be greatly increased if the many stakeholders who are collecting data and developing measurements step back and consider how to take a more systematic approach to collecting, sharing, and analyzing data using a shared system.

While some organizations might use data privacy regulations as an excuse not to collaborate, usually only individual-level data are restricted; aggregate data, the type needed to manage population health improvement efforts, are rarely restricted by privacy requirements. In addition to streamlining measure definitions and data collection, a shared measurement system can include a technology platform that supports many different users for different purposes.

When community stakeholders embrace these four shifts, measurement can become a powerful means of successfully implementing a population health strategy.

Step 6

Harness, Align, and Monitor the Actions

The above techniques are intended to improve the success of the aligned actions that lead to desired outcomes. Without successfully completing the needed actions, strategy implementation remains a hollow hope, even if a coalition is measuring and evaluating every part of a well-crafted strategy. In previous steps, we've intentionally separated actions from Objectives and measures. But once a strategic framework is in place and there is a preliminary plan for measurement, the work on actions can begin. The following techniques can improve management of the actions, allowing a population health strategy to be successfully implemented.

Define Actions that Can Be Completed in a Relatively Short Time

Because they have other urgent priorities, few organizations will do much to advance an action whose deadline is five years out. The plan will likely be lost and forgotten by the time they feel any accountability to accomplish the action.

For these reasons, Population Health Logic Model actions are almost impossible to manage. Since, by definition, a Logic Model includes actions, a coalition using a Logic Model as a primary tool for implementing population health is stuck with two bad choices: 1) vague, high-level actions that can't be realistically managed; or 2) a Logic Model cluttered with actions that make the model difficult to comprehend and quickly obsolete as the actions are completed.

In contrast, if the coalition is using a zoomable Strategy Map, which doesn't include actions, they can zoom in to an appropriate level of detail of the Strategy Map and then build the plan for actions. The working group for that Objective (or cluster of Objectives) can agree on the specific actions to be accomplished in the short term by specific members of the coalition.

Step 6 - cont'd.

People working on actions in one zoomed-in subset of the overall strategy need not be bothered with the specifics of actions accomplished on other parts of the map.

Blending Emergence with Intentionality

Mark Kramer and John Kania, authors of a 2011 article on collective impact, wrote an excellent follow-up article in 2013 titled “Embracing Emergence: How Collective Impact Addresses Complexity.” In the 2013 article, they contrast their recommended approach for emergent collective impact with the approach that attempts to define a detailed work plan for implementing a specific intervention at the start of the effort:

...The problem is that such predetermined solutions rarely work under conditions of complexity—conditions that apply to most major social problems—when unpredictable interactions of multiple players determine the outcomes. And even when successful interventions are found, adoption spreads very gradually, if at all. The power of collective impact lies in the heightened vigilance that comes from multiple organizations looking for resources and innovations through the same lens, the rapid learning that comes from continuous feedback loops, and the immediacy of action that comes from a unified and simultaneous response among all participants.

- Kramer and Kania, 2013

An approach that embraces emergence to address complex population health problems becomes even more powerful when combined with a robust Strategy Map and a technology platform to manage the supporting information

Recruit Others in the Community to Provide “Assists”

While each action should have an owner responsible for taking the lead in getting the action done, collective impact is most effective if the coalitions—specifically the working groups (action teams) that attend to a given subset of the strategy—are consistently looking to engage other organizations or individuals in providing “assists.”

With a little creativity, untapped talents and underutilized resources can become part of a true community strategy for improving population health. When the principles and techniques of Asset-Based Community Development are combined with a well-defined strategy, underutilized assets in a community can be engaged in creative ways to expand the overall impact.

Finding Mutually Reinforcing and Mutually Beneficial Actions

While the concept of Mutually Reinforcing Activities is a central tenant of the collective impact approach, communities often struggle to put this concept into practice.

Step 6 - cont'd.

One of the key steps in creating Mutually Reinforcing Activities is to engage the community around a robust strategy map and then look for “assists” to bolster the success of priority actions. The number of assists can be increased by looking for organizations that would benefit from working together rather than working independently.

This greatly improves sustainability of efforts, as organizations naturally seek to continue to do things that lead to their own benefit.

Simplify Action Monitoring

If actions are short-term and narrowly defined, they can often be measured by simply estimating the percentage completed. A status update note may include other quantitative indicators of how much has been accomplished, but these numbers don't need to be tracked like the other strategic or operational measures.

The organization responsible for each action should make a monthly or quarterly estimate of the percentage their action has been completed along with a brief comment explaining what they accomplished since the prior estimate.

Create a Cadence of Expectation and Accountability

One frustrating characteristic of most community health improvement efforts is that, after initial meetings in which participants talk about the problem and potential solutions, subsequent meetings are often less interesting and productive as the group begins to struggle with engaging a large number of stakeholders.

Too often, after early enthusiasm fades, many participants don't see much value in coming to a big meeting just to listen to uninspiring status updates. As participation wanes, the coalition may struggle to maintain progress on what they set out to accomplish. After being bogged down for a while, many begin to feel they need a new start. To avoid this fate, it is important to establish a cadence, like the drumbeat for a marching band, that keeps the coalition moving forward as a team.

Rather than focusing on compliance or any form of punitive accountability, population health coalition leaders should adopt practices to create enthusiasm about making progress and actively engage participants at the meetings so they see the value of showing up.

To create a cadence of accomplishments, it helps to break actions into small enough blocks of effort that they are not overly intimidating for coalition members to accept responsibility.

Step 6 - cont'd.

Then, leaders should create a culture where coalition members are expected to all pitch in to take realistic action to make progress before the next meeting. Managing all the information for these actions is much easier to accomplish if the coalition is using an online platform like **InsightVision**.

Engage Funders in Supporting Priority Actions

The final recommendation for harnessing, aligning, and monitoring actions involves the funders who give grants to support health improvements in the community. The practices of funders have a substantial impact on how a community works to address any issue. If the funders are structuring their grant-giving around the Objectives on the Strategy Map and having their grantees use the shared measurement system and action monitoring platform, then the adoption of the techniques and tools is much stronger.

Conclusion

While there are abundant articles and discussions about population health, coalitions seeking to implement population health strategies have struggled to find guidance on how it can be done. Many of the typical recommendations focus on optimizing clinical care for individuals within a population.

In contrast, this guide emphasizes a multi-stakeholder strategy management approach that focuses on improving the health of a group (such as a neighborhood or community) through collaboration and Collective Impact.

For more detailed guidance, purchase *Solving Population Health Problems through Collaboration* (Routledge, 2017), where the six steps in this guide are described in greater detail in Chapter 22: "Implementing Population Health Strategies."

About the Author

Bill Barberg is the President and founder of Insightformation, Inc., a management consulting and technology company based in Minneapolis, Minn. He is a globally recognized expert in the Collective Impact, the Balanced Scorecard methodology, collaborative strategy implementation, and community health innovation.

Bill has consulted with dozens of communities and organizations and has presented many conference keynotes, workshops, and Web-conferences on Collective Impact and strategy management, often co-presenting with clients.

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