Best Practices in Engaging Stakeholders

SECTION: ***ENGAGING STAKEHOLDERS***

Learning Area: *Best Practices in Engaging Stakeholders*

Guidance from the PCORI Engagement Rubric

PCORI's Engagement Rubric, developed with PCORI's Advisory Panel on Patient Engagement, provides guidance on methods for engaging stakeholder partners throughout each phase of a research study.

PCORI's principles for engaging stakeholders in research are as follows:

- **Reciprocal relationships.** Stakeholders and researchers decide together how decisions will be made. Team member roles in decision making are clearly defined.
- **Co-learning.** Researchers and stakeholders learn from each other. Researchers help stakeholders learn about the research process. Stakeholders share their ideas, knowledge, and experiences.
- **Partnerships.** Developing partnerships starts with valuing and respecting others. Stakeholders receive reasonable requests and payment for their time. Stakeholders' diversity and cultural differences are respected and valued.
- **Transparency-honesty-trust.** Transparency is sharing information and making decisions together. Honesty and trust result from open and respectful communication.

Resources on Collaboration, Partnership, and Communication

The following provide information and resources for organizers, team members, and stakeholders on how to work together on research projects:

- **Planning for collaboration.** Planning for collaboration can increase readiness and set research teams up to be successful.
- **Preparing team members for partnership.** Preparing for partnership can help organizers, team members, and stakeholders prepare to work together.
- **Practicing effective team communication.** Effective communication among team members is key to a successful team.

Planning for Collaboration

Planning for Successful Team Collaboration

Research teams submit an **engagement plan** when applying for PCORI funding. Once funding is awarded, PCORI provides a template and instructions to help teams expand details about their plan (see PCORI's Planning Resources).

Four best practices can help teams plan for successful collaboration and build positive working relationships.

PCORI'S Planning Resources

- PCORI's Engagement Rubric
- PCORI's Updated Engagement Plan Template
- PCORI Blog: Putting PCORI's Updated Engagement Plan Template to Work in Research

- **Best Practice 1: Include Stakeholders in Planning.**

  Engagement and collaboration are best planned by a core group of team members who will be involved in all phases of the study. Keep the group small but be sure that it includes both stakeholders and researchers who can identify specific needs and potential barriers.

- **Best Practice 2: Build Relationships.**

  Include time for team members to get to know each other in non-research settings. A team dinner or social event can help individuals overcome misperceptions and stereotypes, discover commonalities, and build relationships.

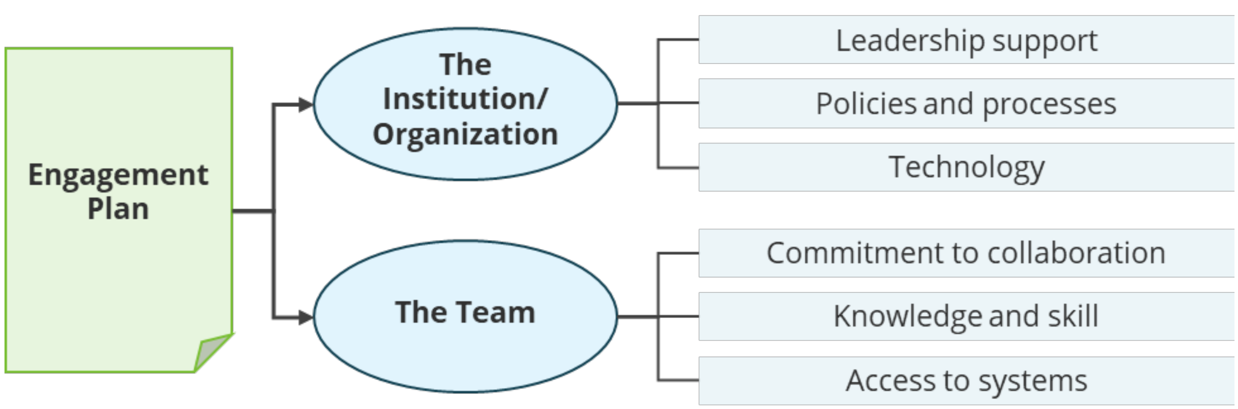
- **Best Practice 3: Assess Readiness.**

  Teams that are most successful at engagement assess readiness throughout the planning process, and adjust their plans as needed before starting an activity.

  Readiness of both the institution (or organization) and the team and individual team members should be assessed (see the figure below).

Early in a team's life cycle, the team should ask, are we *ready* to begin work, and if not, how can we get ready?

Engagement Readiness Assessment of Multi-Stakeholder Research Teams



- Institution or Organization Readiness to Enact the Engagement Plan
  - Institutional leadership is supportive of the engagement plan.
  - Policies and processes are in place to support and implement the engagement plan.
- Stakeholder access to data and facilities as needed.
- Team communication and transparency.
- Stakeholder compensation and reimbursement.
  - Technology is ready and available to assist in multi-location team collaboration and data collection and analysis.
- Team and Individual Readiness to Enact the Engagement Plan
  - Individual team member commitment to inclusive collaboration.
  - Team and individual knowledge and skill to perform study tasks and activities.
- Knowledge of the topic and the context for the study.
- Knowledge of the research process and methods.
- Skills in inclusive team collaboration and relationship development.
- Skills in using available technology and systems.
- Access to institutional and technological systems and tools needed to implement the engagement plan.

- **Best Practice 4: Keep Plans Flexible.**

  No matter how well we plan, things can change. Parts of your engagement plan may need to have alternatives so that the shared vision of the study remains when things change. Successful engagement includes asking, "What might get in the way of our plan?"

Preparing Team Members for Partnership

What do Teams Need to Know?

- **Researchers need to know…**
  - Who key stakeholders are and why their input is needed.
  - What stakeholders' roles will be and how they will be engaged in the research process.
  - How to explain research concepts to non-researchers.
  - How to collaborate with non-scientist team members.
- **Stakeholders need to know…**
  - How the research process works.
  - Their role on the team, and the roles of the other team members.
  - Research terms and concepts likely to be used in team discussions.
  - How to access and use technology and other resources to take part on the team.
  - How to collaborate with scientists.
  - Who to approach if problems arise.

  Five best practices can help prepare researchers and stakeholders to work together.

- **Best Practice 1: Provide Onboarding for Stakeholders.**

  The goal of onboarding is to help new stakeholders enter their first meeting comfortably and confidently with a clear understanding of their role as advisors or team members. Stakeholder onboarding usually includes an opportunity to educate the stakeholders about the research process in general, and what to expect at team meetings. An onboarding meeting can also establish forms of contact, provide a clear understanding of institutional requirements, and provide time to complete institutional paperwork or any special training.

- **Best Practice 2: Orient the Entire Team to Each Other and the Study.**

  Research teams should hold an orientation meeting for all team members. If possible, it should be in-person and include time for social interaction. The orientation meeting should cover:
  - An overview of the study topic.
  - Background information on the stakeholders and researchers on the team.
  - The roles, expectations, processes, tasks, and timeline for the study.
  - When and how team members will communicate with each other.
  - Technology that will be used for communication and any alternatives.
  - Meeting times and locations, including details such as daycare and parking.
  - Payment and reimbursement.

  - Institutional requirements such as security checks, institutional orientation trainings, or tuberculosis testing.
  - Ground rules and commitments for respectful and inclusive interaction.

- **Best Practice 3: Provide Research Fundamentals Training to Stakeholders.**

  PCORI offers an online Research Fundamentals Training Package for stakeholders. The training is self-paced and covers concepts and steps in the research process. It also includes a glossary of common research terms that stakeholders are likely to hear or read.

- **Best Practice 4: Provide a Study-specific Guide.**

  In addition to helping stakeholders learn the basics about research, teams may want to provide them with study-specific background materials. A study-specific guide—that team members can use in meetings and when working on study tasks—should be available in print and online. The guide should include:

  - An overview of the study topic, including background information.
  - Graphics and diagrams that show the timeline of the study.
  - A glossary of study-specific terms that will come up frequently in discussion.

  Teams should review the guide in a meeting. In addition, team organizers may present on some aspects of the study, such as the basic science of a treatment, so that all team members can engage comfortably.

- **Best Practice 5: Plan Team-building Activities.**

  Team-building activities can help team members get to know each other and build trust and collaboration. Team members can run team-building activities themselves or use a professional facilitator.

  Team-building activities can be part of team meetings or separate events. Many teams find that sharing meals together helps build and strengthen relationships. Other types of activities include sharing stories or working together to build a set of ground rules for the team.

Practicing Effective Team Communication

Communication is effective when the receiver understands the communicator's intended meaning. Communication is a skill that requires practice, especially when people are getting to know each other or have different communication styles.

Effective communicators rely on several best practices.

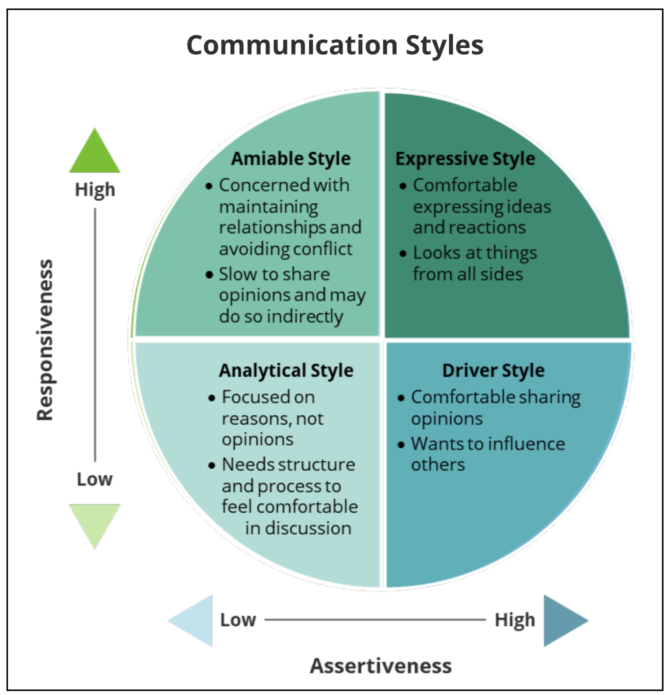
- **Best Practice 1: Communication Style Flexing.**

  Communication style flexing is adapting your communication style for the individual you are communicating with. Style flexing requires self-awareness and skill. Once you know your own communication style, you can adjust it based on who you are communicating with so that your message is received successfully.

  Communication style involves two traits: **responsiveness** and **assertiveness**. These communication styles occur along a continuum.

  - **Responsiveness** is how much attention we pay to what others are thinking or feeling. The more responsive someone is, the more communication is focused on creating positive relationships with others. Responsiveness prioritizes getting along more than being right.
  - **Assertiveness** is how much we pay attention to getting our thoughts and meaning across to others. The more assertive someone is, the more their communication is focused on influencing others. Assertive communicators prioritize their message being heard correctly over being perceived a certain way.

  When a person's degree of responsiveness and assertiveness are combined, one of four general communication styles can be identified (see the figure below).



  No one communication style is better than another. You can flex your style by being more responsive or assertive in response to the style of the person with whom you are communicating.

- **Best Practice 2: Active Listening.**

  Active listening is an effort to fully concentrate on, understand, and respond to information others share with you.

  Active listening involves:

  - Removing hurdles that prevent sharing information.
    - Get rid of distractions such as phones or email.
    - Make eye contact with the speaker, if you are in person.

- Showing you are listening.
  - In person or via Skype or similar software:
    - Maintain eye contact.
  - Use non-verbal cues such as nodding or smiling to show that you understand and to encourage the speaker to continue.
  - On the phone:
    - Use verbal cues such as saying “mm-hmm” or “I see” to show that you understand and to encourage the speaker to continue.
- Asking for clarification if you do not understand.
  - Confirm the meaning of words or phrases the speaker uses.
  - If you do not understand, ask for help.
- Confirming your understanding.
  - Restate what the speaker has told you in your own words and ask if you got it right.

- **Best Practice 3: Adapting to Cultural Differences.**

Like communication style, individual communication is shaped by our cultural background.

> A cultural practice could be as simple as shaking hands when you greet someone or looking down when speaking to a person of authority.

Culture is a shared understanding of the world among a group of people, which creates shared meaning, language, and practices. Culture can be based on many things, including generation, gender, race, ethnicity, occupation, or geographic location. Culture influences the rules people follow when they communicate. For example, some cultures rely heavily on context—unspoken rules or general understanding—when communicating. As a result, they will be less direct when sending a message, expecting the listener to be able to use context to interpret the message correctly. A researcher might use scientific terms or shorthand with peers, but these might not have meaning for people in the community.

Culture can influence a wide variety of communication behaviors, such as:

- Whether messages are given directly or indirectly.
- The amount of space between people or use of touch when communicating.
- The amount of personal information shared in conversations.
- The volume of speech or nonverbal expressiveness used.
- The amount of formality or informality in messages and responses.
- The use of eye contact when giving or receiving messages.

Multi-cultural teams can communicate more effectively by:

- Asking each team member about how they interpreted a specific message.
- Identifying the cultural influences on each member of the team and brainstorming ways that team members can accommodate one another.
- Planning communication with the cultures of team members in mind so that everyone can understand.
- Encouraging team members to consider cultural influence when interpreting messages and seeking clarification rather than making assumptions.