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Strategic Guidance: Practical Approaches For Engaging Employers In Community Alliances

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Creating Ways for Employers to Help Improve Health Care Quality

Nearly all public and private-sector employers play a central role in health care, both as purchasers of health benefits and as a conduit to those benefits for employees and their family members. Employers can have powerful influence over the actions of health plans and providers through contracting expectations and the ways in which those contracts apply standards that hold health plans and providers accountable for achieving results. Similarly, employers can make a direct impact on the health care coverage options, the degree of informed decision-making, and the opportunities for health improvement available to employees and their family members.

It follows, then, that multi-stakeholder alliances or community collaboratives working to improve the value of health care should seek strong partnerships with employers. Many already do, as these collaboratives understand the potential power and pivotal role of employers in the process of improving health care quality, affordability, and value. Depending on a given collaborative or alliance's structure, some even have the benefit of employers helping to fund their efforts as an important component of their long-term sustainability strategy.¹

Just as alliances seek employer involvement, most employers are able to see the value of participating in collaborative efforts to improve health care value. Such involvement can help to lighten the burden of employers' multifaceted role. As businesses, nonprofit organizations, or public agencies, employers are directly affected by poor health care quality and high cost, hitting their bottom-line budget and affecting employee productivity. Employers have an interest in supporting better health and health care decisions of their employees and dependents and are direct channels for communicating with individual "consumers" (employees and family members) about health care quality, affordability and value. In addition, employers are high-priority customers of health plans and providers, who may be more inclined to participate in a multi-stakeholder collaborative that has employers at the table, too.

About *Aligning Forces for Quality*

Aligning Forces for Quality (AF4Q) is the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's signature effort to lift the overall quality of health care in targeted communities, as well as reduce racial and ethnic disparities and provide real models for national reform. The Foundation's commitment to improve health care in 16 AF4Q communities is the largest effort of its kind ever undertaken by a U.S. philanthropy. AF4Q asks the people who get care, give care, and pay for care to work together to improve the quality and value of care delivered locally. The Center for Health Care Quality in the Department of Health Policy at George Washington University School of Public Health and Health Services serves as the national program office. Learn more about AF4Q at www.forces4quality.org. Learn more about RWJF at www.rwjf.org.

About the Author

American Institutes for Research (AIR) provides technical assistance for the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's *Aligning Forces for Quality* initiative. AIR is working with Aligning Forces communities to support consumer engagement efforts to promote high-quality health care at a low cost.

The key to employer engagement is building a relationship that becomes a partnership. To achieve this, a multi-stakeholder alliance must understand the circumstances and needs of the employer, offer products and services that provide value to that employer, and effectively communicate that value to the employer.

Fortunately, for collaboratives just getting started, and even for those that struggle to draw the attention and involvement of the employer community, much can be learned from the successes of other multi-stakeholder collaboratives. This brief highlights employer engagement insights from collaboratives that are currently part of the Aligning Forces for Quality (AF4Q)

program. These collaboratives have involved employers in their work and remain active in efforts to increase employer engagement. This brief also offers several ideas for community collaboratives to consider in assessing the mix of employers in their region and matching their own products or services with the types of employers most likely to value them. Finally, it suggests a few ways to customize and refine effective messages to connect with and engage employers.

Recommendations Based on Current Activities of the AF4Q Alliances

Each of the AF4Q Alliances has been working to engage employers for several years at a minimum—some for much longer. Employer engagement has always been an expectation of the AF4Q program, in which multi-stakeholder Alliances include representation from every type of stakeholder who provides, pays for, and receives care. A 2013 summary of Alliances' employer engagement efforts categorized the activities as tactics that focus on getting to know each other ("courtship") and those that move to meeting each other's needs ("marriage"). Specifically, the five courtship tactics are: (1) peer-to-peer recruitment; (2) employer surveys or interviews; (3) hosting an event; (4) outreach through benefit management companies; and (5) presentations to employers. The three marriage tactics require greater involvement: (1) engaging employers to take a seat at the table; (2) participating in educational programs and using tools designed for employers; and, (3) sharing information with employees.²

The Alliances have had varying degrees of success. This is due to a variety of factors such as regional differences in the employer mix and market structure, recruitment approaches and staff time committed to such activities, and the actual projects in place within each Alliance that are valuable to employers.

Despite this, there are lessons that can be gleaned from Alliances' achievements with employers, drawing from a scan of employer-focused messages and materials on the Alliances' websites as of 2014. Each of these Alliances may have other materials or approaches to employer outreach that are not available or described on their website. However, this assessment focused on reviewing online materials because websites offer an important first impression and may be an entry point for employers. The content of these websites should reflect the messages that each Alliance would like to be seen and understood by each type of stakeholder important to the success of the Alliance.

In some communities, the largest employer is a hospital, medical group, or nursing home. Although collaboratives primarily work with these organizations as providers to improve the quality of care, it's likely worth the effort to engage them as employers as well. Engaging these organizations as employers and providers may require a bit of balancing. These organizations have the potential of making a triple impact on improving quality, cost, and health status as they are health care providers, major employers, and many of their employees can be role models for patients.

The employer-focused messages and communication about employer involvement found on the AF4Q Alliances' websites reveals insights that form the basis for six main guiding principles:

1. **Multi-stakeholder coalitions should describe the specific benefits for employers of engaging with the Alliance.**

Most of the AF4Q Alliances' websites do not list or explain the value employers will get by engaging with the Alliance. These benefits should be clearly articulated from the employer's perspective, including the "What's In It For Me" message to help employers see the value of partnering with or becoming a member of the Alliance. For many employers, knowing the likely return on investment of their time or financial resources is essential.

2. **Multi-stakeholder coalitions should provide examples of how they can work with employers and promote the benefit to employers of working together with the coalition.**

Most Alliances state that they work with employers but provide few examples, if any, of exactly how the Alliance and employers can (or do) work together. To help employers understand how they can work with an Alliance, Alliances should provide clear examples of the programs that employers can engage in, describe the employer's role, and explain the likely outcomes that will occur as a result of participating.

3. **Multi-stakeholder coalitions should provide materials and tools customized for employers to help them get involved with the work to improve health care quality.**

Not all AF4Q Alliances provide targeted information employers can use to meet their needs or goals. Alliances could offer issue briefs, toolkits, programs (e.g., webinars or gatherings) and other resources that reflect the priorities, needs, capacities, and desired role for public and private-sector employers.

Fortunately, the Alliances offer a number of resources on topics such as payment reform and overuse and misuse of care that are designed to speak to consumers. These topics are of interest and relevant to employers too, so the messages and materials could be tailored to address employers directly as well.

4. **Multi-stakeholder coalitions should suggest specific actions employers could take—right away and over the long term—to improve health care affordability and employee health and productivity.**

Although some Alliances communicate about problems facing employers (e.g., increasing costs and limited employee engagement), most of the Alliances' websites lack a "call to action" for employers. Providing information to educate employers on key topics is a useful start; however, real engagement is far more likely to happen with communication that helps employers clearly understand their role in improving value of health care, and to motivate and support employers to take action.

5. **Multi-stakeholder coalitions should describe the products or services they offer (e.g., custom reports, conferences or events, and presentations), in ways that mention employers as potential clients and tailor the descriptions to attract employers specifically.**

Although a number of the Alliances' websites included general descriptions of their products or services, few explained how these products or services can meet the needs of public- and private-sector employers, such as by informing negotiations, supporting employee's efforts to be healthier, or helping employers make better purchasing decisions.

The Research Behind the Recommendations

To inform these six recommendations, the American Institutes for Research (AIR) added to the growing body of knowledge about employer engagement by conducting online research of each of the AF4Q Alliance websites in the summer of 2014. AIR looked for insights from current work and the messages and materials used by the AF4Q coalitions to engage employers in their work. This involved a review of each of the Alliance's organization website and their public reporting websites, if one exists. To identify where each Alliances may be trying to communicate to or about employers, AIR used an array of search terms, including:

- Employer, purchaser, business, payer, union, union trust, self-insured
- Employees, employee benefits, employee engagement, employee wellness, wellness programs
- Lower/reduce health care cost, increasing health care costs, productivity
- Value-based purchasing, value-based insurance design, benefit design, human resources, HR, Choosing Wisely, eValue8
- Business community, Chamber of Commerce, Economic Development Council

In the review of each website, AIR identified specific messages, materials, and webpages that Alliances use to communicate with employers for a variety of purposes, such as increasing awareness and knowledge about the Alliance's work, inviting employers to join the Alliance or participate in an Alliance-sponsored event, or motivating employers to take action to promote improved quality, affordability, and value in health care.

6. Multi-stakeholder coalitions should encourage employers to provide their employees with the resources for use with consumers, which the coalition currently offers.

The AF4Q Alliances offer a number of materials for consumers as well as consumer engagement resources that can be useful for employees, too. For example, all of the Alliances have created public reports that compare the quality of care provided by primary care practices and by hospitals. To find each of these comparison reports, go to <http://forces4quality.org/af4q-alliances-overview>.

Useful reports like this, especially when they are online, can be promoted directly to employers as a valuable tool for their employees and family members in making informed decisions about health care. Similarly, several of the Alliances support and promote the Choosing Wisely³ program to providers and consumers, with no mention of how employers and employees can also use this resource. One option is to promote the *Choosing Wisely Employer Toolkit*, developed by the National Business Coalition on Health, available free for use by any interested organization.⁴

Building on these insights, any multi-stakeholder coalition or alliance working to improve quality, affordability, and health outcomes can bring employers to the table. Developing a customized and practical approach to engagement is important to increase the chances of success. This can be done by:

- Defining your goals and expectations;
- Assessing the mix of employers in your region by relevant characteristics;
- Determining the value that your products or services offer to employers and what the employer must do to realize that benefit;
- Refining your key messages to communicate such value to employers; and
- Using a range of activities to reach and engage receptive employers.

Doing so will help ensure that any efforts to engage employers will fit the unique situation of the coalition and the mix of employers in the local region. These key considerations are described below.

Consider: A One-Size Approach Does Not Fit All Employers

Customized employer engagement strategies will improve the effectiveness of your efforts and the likelihood of achieving desired results. Employers are not a single, homogenous stakeholder group. When it comes to effective engagement approaches, differentiating characteristics might inform a coalition's approach to employer engagement. These include: the size of employer, industry type, and whether the employer is a for-profit business, nonprofit organization, or public agency such as local or state government, school district, or police or fire department.

Hospitals and medical groups are often one of the largest employers in a local community. However, these organizations tend to focus on their clinical expertise and often don't engage as employers. These organizations may need encouragement and direction to recognize this role. In some respects, hospital and medical group employees' health status should be of high priority, as it has a triple impact: driving the hospital's own employee health-related costs; affecting the risk that staff who are not in good health or are distracted due to illness of a family member would provide poorer quality care; and setting an example for patients as role models for staying in good health and preventing illness. Engaging hospital and medical groups in coalitions as both providers and employers will likely require a bit of balancing, but it may be worth the effort.

Identifying the different types of employers in a coalition's geographic area and varying employer engagement approaches accordingly does not need to be exhaustive or extensive. Following a few basic yet strategic steps, the employer engagement approach should take into account:

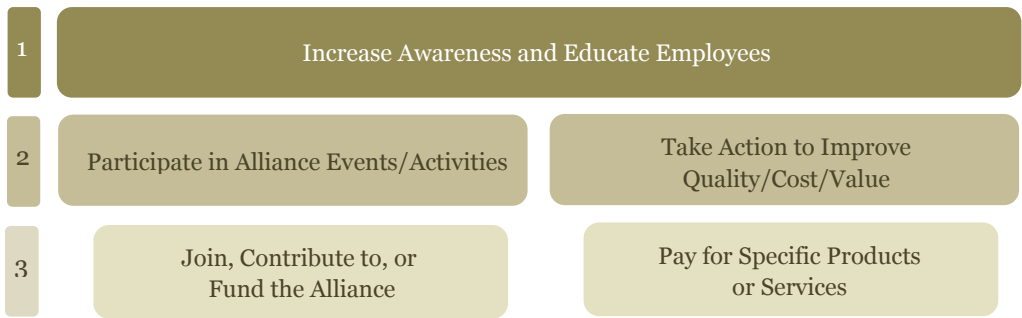
- The multi-stakeholder coalition's goals and intended outcomes of employer engagement;
- The basic structure of the market in which the coalition operates; and
- The likely differences in perspective across segments of employers and how those viewpoints might affect whether and how certain employers find value in the coalition's products or services.

Consider: Many Types of Employer Actions Can Support a Coalition’s Work

First things first: Define the specific things your coalition wants employers to do. This could be a range of actions employers could take that would signal engagement in what the coalition is trying to accomplish. Examples include promoting the coalition’s products and services to others, using the coalition’s products or services themselves, participating in events, and joining or contributing staff time or financial resources to the coalition. Ideally, engaged employers do all of these things in full partnership with a coalition; however, certain actions may be more appropriate for a given employer, and those select actions can still help the coalition have a greater impact in the region.

Some employers may just take one particular type of action or a few, rather than all. As illustrated in Figure 1 below, the level of engagement is like steps on a ladder going into increasing involvement. At the top or first level, an employer could help increase awareness of the Alliance and its efforts, for example, by encouraging employees and their family members to use a coalition’s public reports to compare health care quality as part of their decision-making. Going a bit deeper, the second step on the ladder might be appropriate for employers who have the time and interest in being more involved by participating in the coalition’s events or activities, such as training sessions or webinars, or taking action, for example, by implementing value-based purchasing. The third and greatest level of involvement by an employer could include providing financial support to the coalition by joining or paying for a specific product or service.

Figure 1: Actions That Engaged Employers Might Take



The degree of interest an employer might have in any of these actions likely depends on that employer’s unique circumstances. Reaching out to have personal discussions with business or public agency leaders about these issues is one way to learn about their interests and views about where health care improvement is needed. Other helpful tools to understand employer’s needs and capabilities to engage include surveys, small group interviews, and talking with proxy organizations such as leaders at the local Chamber of Commerce, grange or local farmers’ association, business group, or economic development agency or council.

Regardless of whether information is gathered directly from employers to gauge their individual levels of interest in engagement, keep in mind that not all employers have the same types of interaction with the health care system. Some negotiate with health plans about their coverage or benefit decisions; others work through agents and brokers; and some are in regular communication directly with leaders in hospitals or medical groups. Even those who don’t offer any health insurance to employees still have an interest in their workers being as healthy as possible and productive on the job.

There are themes in these differences that can be used to group the employer community into distinct segments. Consider the issues that might create variation in decisions that employers make. Examples include: the degree to which the employer has (or perceives to have) control or influence over the cost and quality of their health care; their level of knowledge of health care issues and terminology, which can be complicated; and the amount of staff time or financial resources available for them to address health care improvement. Many small employers may only have time to manage the day-to-day issues of running a business or organization so they do not have time to get involved in the Alliance.

Depending on the mix of products or services being offered and the Alliances’ goals for engaging employers, customized engagement approaches and related messaging may be needed. What works for one Alliance may not work for others, and the same holds true for different employers in a given region.

Consider: Every Region has a Unique Mix of Employers

While all employers may have certain interests in common when it comes to health care, upon closer consideration, the interests and needs of different employer segments can vary significantly across a market. Employer characteristics can affect competitive or operational issues, staffing levels and resources available for deep engagement in a coalition, and the employer's real (or perceived) role in health care. There are many ways to group employers into logical segments in a region to help multi-stakeholder coalitions target engagement efforts. For example, the size of employers can range from very large—often national or worldwide—to very small, with only a few employees.

Table 1 below illustrates one way to consider employer segments in a market, grouped by number of employees.

Table 1: Ways to Consider Employer Segmentation

Segment By Size of Employer				
	Very Small (e.g., <25 Employees)	Small (e.g., 26-99 Employees)	Medium (e.g., 100-999 Employees)	Large (e.g., 1,000+ Employees)
Approach to Buying Health Insurance	Off-the-shelf coverage from a health plan or Exchange	Off-the-shelf coverage from a health plan, exchange, or SHOP ⁵	Negotiated coverage from health plans, or self-insured	Self-insured
Key Health Care Partners	Agents, exchange staff	Agents, exchange staff, health plans	Agents, brokers, health plans	Brokers, health plans, TPAs
Perceived Ability to Control Costs and Health Outcomes	None/Very Low	Very Low	Low/Medium	Medium/High
Available Staff or Resources	None/Very Low	Very Low	Medium	High
Where or How to Reach Them	SBA* lists or workshops; Chambers of Commerce; media	Chambers of Commerce; SBA lists or workshops; media	Chambers of Commerce; business coalitions;** human resources or benefits groups***	Direct contact; business coalitions; HR or benefits groups

* SBA = Small Business Administration (<http://www.sba.gov>)

** Such as statewide or local business roundtables, the National Business Coalition on Health, the National Business Group on Health, and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce

*** Such as the Society for Human Resource Management or the Employee Benefits Research Institute

As Table 1 above shows, large employers typically have direct control over decisions in their self-insured plans (e.g., value-based purchasing, negotiations, and data analyzed specific to their employee and dependent population) or as they partner with health plans or large provider groups. In contrast, mid-sized and small employers may not feel that they have any influence on health plan decisions regarding quality metrics, payment incentives, network contracting, or other elements that drive value-based care. Small and mid-sized employers may therefore not respond to a call to engage in value-based purchasing because they may not see any relevance to what they do and where they believe they have control or influence.

These concepts can be helpful when thinking about which groups of employers in the region might be the most receptive to certain levels of engagement. For example, in Wisconsin there are at least two active employer coalitions and purchasing groups, separate from the AF4Q Alliance.⁶ It stands to reason that employers who are already engaged in one of the employer coalitions or purchasing groups are more likely to also show interest in getting involved in aligning payment reform strategies, as compared to employers who have no history of involvement in coordinated efforts to improve health care. Not surprisingly, interest in working on innovative payment strategies was also higher among employers already making efforts to manage health care costs and increase employee engagement, and whose executive leaders were directly involved in the effort.⁷

It is these types of differences that affect employers' perceptions of the value that a coalition can or does provide. Understanding these differences should drive which approaches the coalition takes to engage specific employers in each segment.

Finding basic information about the mix of employers in a region, as well as the number and names of employers in each segment, can be simple. The federal government provides quite a bit of this type of data. For example, Table 2 below shows the distribution of employers in each state containing an AF4Q Alliance, by the number of employees.

Table 2: Distribution of Employers in Select States, by Size

State	Very Small <25 Employees (%)	Small 25-99 Employees (%)	Medium 100-999 Employees (%)	Large 1000+ Employees (%)
California	73.0%	8.9%	5.6%	12.5%
Kansas	69.5%	8.7%	7.0%	14.8%
Maine	74.6%	7.5%	7.3%	10.6%
Massachusetts	69.7%	8.4%	7.5%	14.3%
Michigan	71.6%	8.6%	6.7%	13.1%
Minnesota	74.0%	6.9%	8.2%	10.9%
Missouri	67.3%	8.3%	6.6%	17.8%
New Mexico	67.3%	8.0%	7.5%	17.2%
New York	77.8%	6.7%	5.7%	9.8%
Ohio	65.3%	9.0%	8.0%	17.8%
Oregon	70.9%	7.1%	8.0%	14.0%
Pennsylvania	67.4%	8.7%	7.0%	16.9%
Tennessee	63.3%	8.0%	7.6%	21.1%
Washington	73.5%	7.8%	5.7%	13.0%
Wisconsin	66.6%	10.3%	7.2%	15.9%

Source: Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, Center for Financing, Access and Cost Trends. 2013 Medical Expenditure Panel Survey-Insurance Component.

Data about employers can be found through web searches using questions about the number and names of types of employers in a region. In addition, many cities have a business journal that produces lists of employers and related information, such as headquarter location, whether it is public or private, employee count, industry, annual revenues, and contact information.⁸ These data may be available free to subscribers to the business journal. Considering the potential value of successful employer engagement, an Alliance or coalition may find that a small investment in this type of data source will quickly pay for itself given how it can inform more effective outreach with target employers.

Consider: Employers May Value Different Parts of a Coalition's Work

After assessing the mix of employers in a given region, the next step is to map the coalition's or Alliance's projects, products, services, or other relevant goals for engagement (e.g., increase the number of employer members) to the specific employer groups or segments that are most likely to see value. The specific mix of projects, products, services, or relevant goals will be unique to each Alliance. While not an exhaustive list of all possible options, the following are some of the more common examples:

- Public Reporting/Transparency**—This product is a web-based public report on health care quality, cost, and value, often shown as measurement of the processes and health care provided through hospitals, medical groups, and other facilities. Each AF4Q Alliance offers this product in its region as a centerpiece of its work and as a tool to educate and engage consumers, including employees and their family members, in their health and health care decisions.

- **Choosing Wisely/The Employee Health Communication Toolkit**—These products are widely available⁹ and have been coupled with services from several Alliances to help employers use these resources effectively when communicating with employees about health care quality and informed decision-making.
- **Join the Alliance/Pay for Membership**—Having employers at the table as members or paid participants is a key engagement goal for many Alliances. Ideally, the value of the combination of all of the products and services offered to employers should exceed the cost of joining.
- **Attend Alliance Events and Webinars**—These services offer a range of value to employers, depending on the topic’s relevance. Events, seminars, webinars, and presentations provide unique opportunities for employers to learn from fellow employers, other stakeholders, and the Alliance.
- **Participate in Committees and Projects**—This service presents opportunities for employers to shape the direction of the Alliance’s work in a region while addressing employers’ specific needs. The value of these types of services might be described in ways that appeal to an employer’s enlightened self-interest.
- **Payment Reform/Value-Based Purchasing Strategies**—This service brings employers together with like-minded purchasers, such as health plans or union trusts, to maximize the impact of each organization’s contracting, payment, and purchasing by aligning around the common approaches.
- **Custom Reports and Data Analysis**—These products are created using data from self-insured employers in collaboration with the employer’s third-party administrator or health plan. Alliances offer these private reports to help large employers assess the quality of care for their employees and refine their purchasing approach and related communication with employees.

It is important to identify the types of employers most likely to be receptive to engaging with the Alliance for the particular service, product, program, or organizational goal such as funding and membership growth. Table 3 below offers an illustrative example of possible levels of interest by different employers in a market (segmented by employer size to continue with the earlier example).

Table 3: Matching Employer Groups with Alliance Products, Services and Engagement Goals

Likely Interest and Possible “Call to Action” by Employer Segment				
	Very Small (<25 Employees)	Small (26-99 Employees)	Medium (100-999 Employees)	Large (1,000+ Employees)
Public Reporting/ Transparency	YES—Promote to employees to raise awareness about health care quality/costs and inform decisions	YES—Promote to employees to raise awareness about health care quality/costs and inform decisions	YES—Promote to employees to raise awareness about health care quality/costs; use in coverage negotiations	MAYBE—Promote to local employees with incentives to make informed decisions, which might include choosing high-value providers; use in local negotiations if the content is consistent with what they use in other regions
Choosing Wisely/ The Employee Health Communication Toolkit¹⁰	YES—Encourage employees to use materials to find good-quality care and be informed consumers	YES—Encourage employees to use materials to find good-quality care and be informed consumers	YES—Promote to employees to find good-quality care and be informed consumers, possibly with incentives	MAYBE—Integrate with other efforts, use incentives that they may already be using in other geographic regions
Join the Alliance/Pay for Membership	MAYBE [must be low cost, high value]	MAYBE [must be low cost, high value]	YES—Increase impact on employee health and cost; team with other employers to have more influence on health plans and providers	YES—Increase impact on employee health and cost; team with other employers to increase influence on health plans and providers

Attend Alliance Events and Webinars	<i>MAYBE [must be time limited and very high value]</i>	<i>MAYBE [must be time limited and very high value]</i>	YES—Learn best practices (e.g., employee engagement)	YES—Learn about best practices (e.g., value-based purchasing)
Participate in Committees and Projects	<i>MAYBE [must be time limited and very high value]</i>	<i>MAYBE [must be time limited and very high value]</i>	YES—If topic is relevant to employer’s needs and the return on investment is clear and compelling	YES—If local work is relevant to employer’s needs and the return on investment is clear and compelling
Payment Reform/ Value-Based Purchasing Strategies	<i>NO [difficult to link to perceived locus of control]</i>	<i>NO [difficult to link to perceived locus of control]</i>	YES—Add to health plan discussions or negotiations	YES —Add approaches to negotiations with TPA or providers
Custom Reports and Data Analysis	<i>NO [too small to base reports on employer’s data]</i>	<i>NO [too small to base reports on employer’s data]</i>	YES—If approach is likely to meet employer’s need to decrease cost and improve productivity	YES—If approach is likely to meet employer’s need to decrease cost and improve productivity

Successful recruitment and engagement of employers hinges on the ability to define and communicate the elements of the Alliance’s work—and the benefits—that are valuable to a particular segment of employers (by size, industry type, other factor). No amount of outreach will entice employers to engage in the Alliance itself or in specific projects, or to use the Alliance’s products or services, if the employer does not see value or a return on their investment of their time and financial support.

Consider: Effective Communication Needs to Resonate with the Employer

All types and sizes of employers will have some interests in common, such as wanting employees and their family members to be as healthy as possible. Key messages about these common interests can be consistently used in a range of engagement activities spanning from individual conversations to presentations, website text, and other materials. The trick is to ensure the key messages make sense to the target employers and speak to issues that they care about. See **Appendix A** for an example of employer-oriented messages used by the Washington Health Alliance (an AF4Q Alliance).

At some level, the messages will need to be customized because not all employers are likely to be interested in the same opportunities. As noted earlier, employers’ health care purchasing situations and organizational challenges may vary, so the value proposition—that is, the answer to the question “What’s in it for me as an employer?”—will likely differ as well.

Table 4 below is an illustrative example of how key messages might be assessed for relative “fit” with different employer segments. Again, this is just one way to look at the issues, based on employer size.

Table 4: Customizing Key Messages Based on Size of Employee

	Example Employer Segment			
	Very Small (<25 Employees)	Small (26-99 Employees)	Medium (100-999 Employees)	Large (1,000+ Employees)
Can Do More Together Than Can Do Alone	YES—No perceived market power	YES—Little perceived market power	YES—To partner with other employers for greater impact	Maybe—Might prefer to engage at national v. regional level
Not All Health Care is Effective or High Quality	YES—With examples of what very small employers can do to help employees get higher-quality care	YES—With examples of what small employers can do to help employees get higher-quality care	YES—With examples of what mid-sized employers can do to help employees get higher-quality care	YES—With examples of what large employers can do to help employees get higher-quality care
Employees Need Comparative Performance Information to Make Informed Decisions	YES—With examples of how very small employers can encourage employees to use the reports	YES—With examples of how small employers can encourage employees to use the reports	YES—With examples of how mid-sized employers and their employees can use the reports	YES—With examples of how standard or custom reports can be used by large employers and their employees
Improve Employee Health to Reduce Cost, Absenteeism, and Presenteeism	YES—Frame as taking care of employees; give examples of what very small employers can do	YES—Frame as taking care of employees; give examples of what small employers can do, along with ROI	YES—Give examples of what medium-sized employers can do, along with ROI	YES—Give examples of what large employers can do, along with ROI
Use Your Market Power to Drive Lower Cost and Better Results	<i>NO [likely cannot relate: do not negotiate benefits or rates]</i>	<i>NO [likely cannot relate: do not negotiate benefits or rates]</i>	YES—Enhance discussions or negotiations with health plans	YES—Enhance discussions or negotiations with TPAs or providers

Each set of messages should communicate a compelling value proposition that answers the employer’s question, “What’s in it for me?” Some messages may be universally valuable for all employers, while others may be helpful for only some employers regarding certain products or services. Thinking through the value proposition for each employer segment should help reveal the best way to talk about why and how an employer should engage. Ideally, all materials will describe the expected result or return on investment (ROI) for the employer.

To best convey the ROI, an Alliance must make efforts to generally—and specifically, if resources are available—understand employers’ circumstances, likely needs, and capabilities, and anticipate and address the likely impact of the engagement action on employees. Once the key messages have been refined to be compelling for employers, they can be used to reach receptive audiences. This may be done by casting a wide net, such as working through the media and Chambers of Commerce, or by working through existing channels such as brokers, agents, associations of human resources (HR) leaders or benefits managers to get to specific employers. When funding is limited, the decision to go broad or narrow should be based on the strategic and operational goals of the Alliance regarding employer engagement, which will help illuminate the highest-priority employer segments to pursue. Opportunities will continue to grow into the future, as the presence and likely influence of state or federally sponsored marketplace exchanges or Small Business Health Options Program (SHOP) will continue to grow.¹¹

Summing It Up: Take a Step-Wise Approach to Employer Engagement

The work to engage a broader array of employers is a marathon, not a sprint. Taking the time to focus on key steps—your goals for employer engagement, understanding the mix of employers in your region, and mapping the employer segments to your coalition’s goals and expectations for employer engagement, then to the services and products offered

by the coalition—will create a roadmap for more effective outreach and employer engagement. See **Appendix B** for one example of a coordinated approach to employer engagement at The Health Collaborative (AF4Q Alliance in Cincinnati).

Key takeaways for a more customized and practical approach to engagement:

- Define your employer engagement goals and expectations.
- Assess the mix of employers in your region, by size, industry, and other relevant characteristics.
- For each product, service, or other employer engagement expectation or goal, ask, “What’s in it for employers?” Does the answer differ depending on key characteristics of different groups of employers?
- Where there is clear value for certain employers, clearly define the value, what the employer must do to realize that benefit, and other expected outcomes, including the impact on the employees.
- Refine the messages used to communicate the value to employers overall, to specific segments or groups of employers, or to individual employers.
- Use a range of activities to reach employers who are likely to be receptive, going wide through media and using established channels such as Chambers, associations, and peer meetings.

Appendix A: A Profile of Employer Engagement in Washington State

What: Washington Health Alliance Website (AF4Q Alliance in Washington State)

Where: <http://wahealthalliance.org/join-us/benefits-of-membership/>

The messages below describe the benefits of becoming an Alliance member in terms that resonate with many employers. More specifically:

- **Help with controlling your health care costs.** The Alliance offers tools that can help you identify opportunities to lower costs.
- **Custom reports that can help you better understand your population.** Our large data suppliers receive a custom version of our Community Checkup report showing how their population compares to the rest of the region.
- **Access to members-only data on cost.** The Alliance's work on resource use for high-volume hospitalizations provides a clearer understanding of which delivery systems in our region use resources efficiently.
- **A customized consumer engagement campaign.** The Alliance's Own Your Health campaign educates your employees about how they can better manage their health and health care.
- **The power of a collective voice.** By speaking with one voice, purchasers can have a greater impact with providers and health plans.
- **Benchmarking health plans.** The Alliance uses the eValue8 tool from the National Business Coalition on Health to measure the performance of health plans and to facilitate a direct discussion between plans and purchasers about expectations for improvement.
- **Direct conversations with providers.** Purchasers join together in direct conversations with providers on such issues as resource use and the proliferation of freestanding emergency rooms, amplifying the importance of their concerns in a rapidly consolidating market.
- **Networking with other purchasers.** The Alliance's purchaser affinity group brings together senior leaders and benefits professionals to share lessons learned based on their own experiences, as well as the experience of outside experts.

Appendix B: A Profile of Employer Engagement in Cincinnati, Ohio

What: The Health Collaborative Website (AF4Q Alliance in Cincinnati)

Where: <http://yourhealthmatters.org/for-health-care-professionals-employers.php>

The following elements appear on this Alliance's website, showing how employer engagement is woven throughout their approach, as reflected in the messages and materials on their website.

- Emphasizes that improving the quality of care makes Cincinnati a better place to live and do business. Highlights initiatives and programs for employers and refers to businesses as partners in developing innovative solutions. Emphasizes that employers are concerned about quality of care and rising health care costs and, as a result, are taking action.
- Distinguishes themselves from other organizations because of the employer support.

“What makes us stand out is the support we have from our business community. The Health Collaborative was formed in response to the business community's desire to make health care excellence an economic benefit of doing business in Greater Cincinnati.”
- Focuses on helping employers control costs and get better value; explains the benefits of high-quality care for employers.

“By working to improve quality, employers can: (1) Make sure employees are getting the best health care possible for the money; (2) improve workforce productivity; and (3) attract and retain top employees. At the same time, employees can make better decisions about providers they seek care from and the care they receive.”
- Promotes public reports to employers as a tool to engage employees. Conveys that employers can save money by having more engaged employees.
- Provides an employer toolkit and a “widget” of YourHealthMatters.org that employers can embed on employee intranet sites, websites, and wellness content, etc., so that employees can see quality ratings.

References

- ¹ “Developing a Communication Strategy for Employers: Better Health Greater Cleveland.” Meeting summary prepared by AIR and GYMR, June 2014.
- ² “Tactics for Engaging Employers in Community Alliances,” Aligning Forces for Quality Brief, May 2013.
- ³ Choosing Wisely is a program of the ABIM Foundation: <http://www.choosingwisely.org/>.
- ⁴ The Choosing Wisely Employer Toolkit, produced by the National Business Coalition on Health and the American Board of Internal Medicine, is available at <http://www.nbch.org/choosing-wisely-employer-toolkit>.
- ⁵ Starting in 2015, employers with fewer than 50 employees can purchase insurance in a Small Business Health Options Program, or SHOP. This will expand to employers with fewer than 100 employees in 2016.
- ⁶ The Wisconsin Business Healthcare Group is a membership organization of large and small employers supporting market-driven health care delivery (<http://businesshealthcaregroup.org/>). The Alliance is a coalition of self-funded business in Wisconsin aimed at improving health care (<http://www.the-alliance.org/>).
- ⁷ “First Steps in Engaging Employers in Innovative Payment Strategies: Lessons from Wisconsin.” Aligning Forces for Quality Primer/Brief, January 2014.
- ⁸ One example is the Book of Lists, published by business journals in 60 markets in the USA. <http://www.bizjournals.com/bizbooks/>
- ⁹ Choosing Wisely information resources are available at <http://www.choosingwisely.org>, and The Employee Health Communication Toolkit can be found at www.helpyouremployeeshealth.com.
- ¹⁰ “Help Your Employees Health” is a communication toolkit developed by AIR, with funding from the California Health Care Foundation and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, to support employers in confidently and effectively educating employees about complex health care issues: 1) finding good quality health care; 2) making wise health care decisions; and 3) being informed health care consumers. <http://www.helpyouremployeeshealth.com>.
- ¹¹ “HealthInsight New Mexico: A Framework for an Employer Engagement Action Plan”, AIR, November 2013.