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# The Secret to Partnership Success

*Aligning stakeholders is essential.*

Developing strategies to enhance the customer experience, reduce the total cost of care, optimize value-based payment models, enhance coverage and access, and improve population health for all groups is a widely recognized need. These complex challenges require innovative solutions that span many sectors of the health ecosystem. Effective and unique collaborations across sectors will be key to success.

These collaborations will bring together groups that are diverse in purpose, values, perspectives, culture, expertise and incentives. While this diversity provides great value, it also presents big challenges. Leadership is the essential ingredient to designing and delivering these solutions. Successful leaders will adopt both an ecosystem mindset and skill set.

## The Health Ecosystem Leadership Model

This mindset and skill set are contained within the HELM framework, which outlines actions leaders can take to generate cross-sector collaborative solutions that address the field's most pressing needs. The framework is built around four capabilities: envision the future, align stakeholders, manage boundaries and obstacles, and act and learn. Though the capabilities are described sequentially, HELM leaders move between them as the situation dictates.

### Envision the Future

First, leaders need a clear vision of the direction in which their organization is heading and what it hopes to achieve. Then they can begin to generate ideas about how organizations from other sectors can contribute to achieving that vision. **Result:** A compelling vision that motivates and engages all stakeholders.

### Align Stakeholders

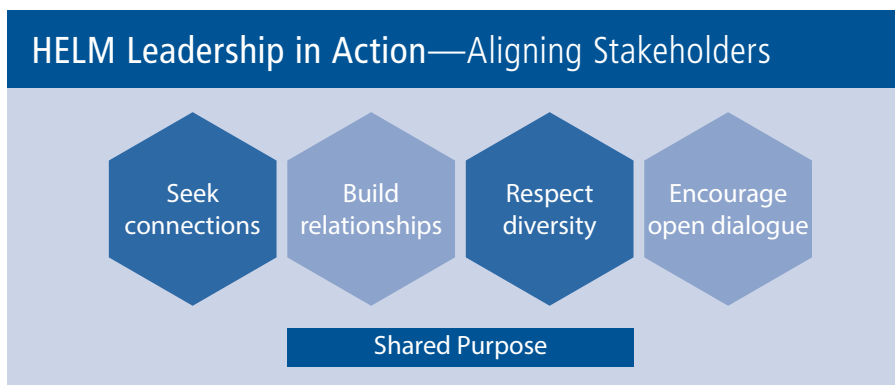
As stakeholders from other sectors join the conversation, leaders invite them to build on their original vision. Stakeholder inputs and interests need to be incorporated so a shared and jointly owned solution can emerge. Throughout the conversations, leaders focus on building mutual trust, respect and openness so any problems can be resolved successfully. **Result:** Stakeholders are organized around a shared purpose and the trust necessary to build a successful path forward.

### Manage Boundaries and Obstacles

The development of collaborative solutions likely will face bumps along the road. Overcoming these obstacles requires leaders to focus on the opportunity, reinforce the partnership's objectives and seek common interests. This allows stakeholders to resolve points of tension, clarify roles and realign actions. **Result:** Effective resolution of obstacles, including decision rights, financing and data sharing.

### Act and Learn

Ultimately, leaders must advance the shared vision for collaboration. In this step, action plans are designed for ongoing feedback, continuous improvement and evolution of the vision.



**Result:** Plans are defined, implemented and iterated so progress occurs.

These four capabilities are easily understood. But knowing is not doing. In our experience, many partnerships fall apart because:

- They lack a vision that is informed by all stakeholders.
- There is insufficient alignment around a common purpose.
- Conflicts are not successfully surfaced and resolved.
- Risk and continuous improvement are not embraced equally.

These problems occur even when executives who demonstrate success within their own organizations are leading the efforts. These capable leaders are often subject to powerful leadership derailers that negatively impact their approach to solving the challenges involved with collaboration and their perspectives on potential solutions. Examples of such derailers include:

- Focusing on short-term results.
- Being unable or unwilling to accept shared solutions.
- Paying insufficient attention to building trust and demonstrating respect for divergent interests.
- Focusing on one's own organization rather than embracing others' perspectives.
- Recognizing only information that reinforces preexisting views.
- Defining problems and solutions too narrowly.

### **Aligning Stakeholders: The Foundation for Successful Collaboration**

In our March/April 2019 *Healthcare Executive* article, "Leading From the

HELM," we provide an overview of the HELM model. While all the HELM capabilities are important, aligning stakeholders is fundamental to success (see chart on Page 36).

Participants in our ACHE e-learning course, "Leading Partnerships Across the Ecosystem to Drive Value and Transform Health," identified stakeholder alignment as most in need of improvement.

One of the participants who was having difficulty advancing a particular challenge said it this way, "Perhaps the most important lesson I learned moving through my challenge was the need to build in time to test my assumptions, step back from my original plan, and encourage open dialogue and exchange of interests, ideas and perspectives with all parties." This executive realized there was a need to pay greater attention to the relationships and interactions between stakeholders by more effectively and consistently demonstrating the leadership actions that help build trust and a shared purpose, such as:

- Manage pacing.
- Watch how others are reacting.
- Provide time for people to get to know each other.
- Encourage sharing of background, priorities and expertise.
- Place assumptions aside.
- Focus on inquiry more than advocacy.
- Share ideas and solicit reactions.

### **Enhancing Your Ability to Align Stakeholders**

The good news is that methods to align stakeholders can be developed. Consider the following actions to enhance your ability to align stakeholders:

**Seek connections with others to further the purpose.** Actively connect with other stakeholders by encouraging contributions from all parties.

**Take concrete steps to enable your partners to come together and build relationships.** When meeting, include enough time for leaders to get to know one another and establish trust.

**Demonstrate respect for diversity of opinion, perspectives, interests and values.** Avoid making assumptions about each party and their organizations. Instead, ask questions to actively try to understand differing viewpoints.

**Encourage open dialogue and exchange of interests, ideas, expertise and information across stakeholders.** Work hard to get everyone involved, avoid taking over conversations and focus on inquiry rather than advocacy.

Developing HELM leadership abilities is critical to improving healthcare value and accessibility and building healthy communities. In the wise words of Harvard Business School's Amy Edmondson, PhD, "Leaders who adopt [HELM] with passionate intent will be poised to address both the challenges and the opportunities of teaming across sectors to transform healthcare." ▲

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