



Because interactions have different goals, organizations play different roles, and opportunities vary from one audience to the next, no single message works in every situation. This is why understanding the framework of elevator pitches will help you make quick adjustments based on your audience and the connection you intend to make.

A message that works when introducing yourself to a new collaborative partner may not be the same message you use to recruit volunteers, advocate for change, connect people to services, or invite someone to join a coalition effort.

The most effective communicators choose a message that matches the conversation they are trying to have.

What are you hoping to accomplish?

INTRODUCTION Use this when: You want to build awareness and introduce your organization.
RELATIONSHIP-BUILDING Use this when: You want to build trust and learn what matters to others.
CAPACITY-BUILDING Use this when: You want to recruit partners and increase participation.
ADVOCACY Use this when: You want to influence decisions and inspire action.
SERVICE Use this when: You want to connect people to programs, resources, and supports.

Once you've identified the type of message you need, take time to prepare before the conversation.

PREPARE FOR SUCCESS: Before You Meet

Learn About Them

- Mission
- Priorities
- Challenges
- Communication & Context
- Who they serve

Identify Shared Interests

- What matters to them?
- What matters to you?
- Where do those overlap?

Plan Your Conversation

- Goal
- Message
- Ask
- Next Step

INSTEAD OF THIS...TRY THIS

Join our coalition.

→ We'd value your perspective.

We use the SPF.

→ We use local data and community input to guide our work.

We need stakeholder engagement.

→ We need people who care about this issue to help shape solutions.

Can you help us?

→ Would you be willing to share your expertise on this issue?

We need more coalition members.

→ We're looking for partners who want to help strengthen our community's response.

Context Matters - Learn How They Talk About What Matters

Different audiences may care about the same issue but describe its impact differently. Pay attention to the words, concerns, and priorities they naturally use. What pressures or realities shape their perspective?

For example:

A business leader might talk about:

workforce stability • absenteeism • retention • productivity

A faith leader might talk about:

compassion • families • belonging • serving the community

A school partner might talk about:

student well-being • attendance • academic success • school climate

A healthcare partner might talk about:

patient outcomes • access to care • early intervention • continuity of care

You don't need to change your purpose—you need to connect it to what matters to the person in front of you.

The words we choose matter—but so does our tone, curiosity, and intention. Small changes in language can make a message more relatable, audience-centered, and effective.

MINDSET SHIFT

Instead of thinking:

"How do I get them to say yes?"

Try thinking:

*"What can I learn about what matters to them?"
and
"How do I discover what's possible together?"*

The goal isn't to get to "yes." The goal is to discover where your purpose and their priorities intersect—and what might be the next possible step together.

Even experienced communicators fall into common traps. Avoiding these mistakes can help your message build trust, create connection, and open the door to meaningful engagement.

FIVE MESSAGING MISTAKES

- Talking about yourself instead of the audience
- Using acronyms and jargon
- Leading with the organization instead of the issue
- Making the ask too big
- Using the same message for everyone

Build Your Message

Use this worksheet to turn your purpose and your audience's priorities into a short, natural conversation starter.

You are not trying to explain everything. Your goal is to open the door to the next conversation. Start with what you hope to accomplish, learn what matters to your audience, and build a message that creates a meaningful next step.

1. Start With the Conversation

WHO ARE YOU TALKING WITH?	WHAT ARE YOU HOPING TO ACCOMPLISH?
Person / organization / sector: _____	☐ Introduce / build awareness ☐ Build a relationship / trust ☐ Build capacity / participation ☐ Advocate / inspire action ☐ Connect to a service / resource ☐ Other: _____

2. Prepare Before You Meet

LEARN ABOUT THEM	FIND THE OVERLAP	PLAN THE NEXT STEP
• What is their mission or role?	• What matters to them?	• What do I want them to understand?
• What are their priorities?	• What matters to us?	• What value might this offer them?
• What challenges are they facing?	• Where do those priorities connect?	• What is a realistic next step?
• How do they talk about issues that matter to them?	• What could be possible together?	• What question do I want to ask?

Put It Together

Build the message in pieces first. Then say it out loud and make it sound like you.

3. Draft the Building Blocks

OPEN – Introduce yourself - Who are you and why are you here? *Keep it brief. Use plain language; avoid acronyms unless you explain them.*

EXPLAIN – Give a 10-15 second overview of the concern and share what the coalition is/will be doing. *Name the issue, priority, challenge, or opportunity that connects to their world.*

VALUE – Connect the person and what matters to them, to the concern. *Focus on impact and possibility, not a long description of your process.*

ASK – What is the next action step you would like them to take? *Make the ask appropriate to this conversation: another meeting, input, a referral, participation, a training, a connection, or simply permission to follow up.*

4. Write Your 30-60 Second Version

Put the pieces together. Aim for clear, brief, audience-specific, and conversational.

My message:

5. Check the Message Before You Use It

MESSAGE CHECK

- ☐ Clear and jargon-free
- ☐ Focused on what matters to them
- ☐ Explains value / impact
- ☐ Includes a realistic next step
- ☐ Short enough to invite conversation

MINDSET CHECK

- ☐ Am I curious, not just persuasive?
- ☐ Am I listening as much as I am talking?
- ☐ Am I trying to understand what matters to them?
- ☐ Am I open to a different next step than I expected?

6. Practice, Listen, Adapt

Practice until the message feels natural - not memorized. After the conversation, capture what you learned and adjust for next time.

What did I learn about what matters to them?

What will I change or try next time?

The goal is not to get to "yes." The goal is to discover what is possible together.



The Center for Community Engagement is funded in full or in part through a State Opioid Response Grant (TI085769) to the Illinois Department of Human Services, Division of Behavioral Health and Recovery, from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.