

How to Build a Health Literate Organization



Sierra Adler, MSc
Senior Copywriter,
Fingerpaint



Laura Wilson, Med
SVP, Director of Patient
Health Experience,
Fingerpaint

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Most people who work in the world of healthcare—whether in direct patient care or those of us who work behind the scenes to maintain the systems that produce and disseminate healthcare information from afar—are invested in improving health outcomes.

If you're reading this post, that's likely true for you. And it's also true at Fingerpaint, the company we work for that's part of [Fingerpaint Group](#), an integrated collective of healthcare companies informed by data and driven by innate curiosity and creativity in the pharma and biotech space. In fact, it's what drew both of us to the company.

At Fingerpaint, our colleagues and company leaders are fiercely empathetic and driven to make the world a better, more accessible place for everyone impacted by the healthcare system. But, intention alone does not always facilitate a meaningful impact. We needed to do more.

What is organizational health literacy?

In 2020, we set out to build a more [health-literate organization](#) and bolster our offerings to improve our clients' work, as well. This meant formalizing our commitment to health literacy at an organizational level.

[Healthy People 2030](#) defines organizational health literacy as “the degree to which organizations equitably enable individuals to find, understand, and use information and services to inform health-related decisions and actions for themselves and others.”

What does building a health-literate organization really mean and entail?

If this is a question you ask yourself, maybe our experience and these steps can be helpful to you.

Step 1. Align as an organization on your own working definition of a health literacy mission.

- How does that align with or augment your existing company values?
- How will you turn that mission into something valuable for your clients/customers/patients?

With this in mind, we developed our solution to building organizational health literacy within Fingerpaint and embarked on an initiative we called, “Clear Communications.” Overall, this initiative’s mission was focused on guiding our work as an organization and ensuring everything we created was equitable and accessible for a given population.

Step 2. Recruit organizational champions for your new program.

Members of our senior leadership team sponsored the program, greenlit our efforts, and were pulled in for key conversations and checkpoints.

We also built a core team of individuals from across disciplines (representative of the teams that will push forward our work day-to-day) to strategize, develop, and implement our mission.

Step 3. Roll out an awareness program to all employees.

We decided we needed more champions. (Actually, we wanted everybody in the organization to become a health literacy champion).

To do that, we rolled out an internal awareness program to help our colleagues understand the value of our initiative and build empathy for the frustrating reality of healthcare communications. This included:

- An open-to-everyone Slack channel dedicated to all things health literacy. We focused many of our conversation prompts around Health Literacy Month in October. Content ranged from education to surveys to reflections about individual experiences—both personal and professional.
- A company-wide survey to anonymously gather people’s personal experiences with healthcare interactions and communications. Once we combed through all the answers, we compiled them and shared them back to demonstrate how people from all backgrounds (and all levels of education) can encounter communication challenges when interacting with the healthcare system.

Step 4. Create a library of useful tools and documents to help guide individuals and teams.

To find things we wanted to leverage, we performed a wide audit of existing health literacy guidelines and materials. And then it was time to develop our own internal tools and guidance for Clear Communications. This included developing:

- A how-to guide for creating pieces using clear communications best practices.
- A one-stop checklist for review teams to assess pieces through a clear communications lens.
- A library of example materials that demonstrate common challenges to health literacy and best practices in action.

Step 5. Share your resources company-wide.

Once our Clear Communications team finished developing all the assets and we were confident there was a basis of understanding across the organization about the value of creating clear and accessible assets and systems, it was time to share all our resources with the company. The roll-out included:

- An introductory training session, open to anyone from any department, that introduced the Clear Communications initiative, its mission, and gave an overview of the asset structure.
- More detailed, hands-on training for members of the departments implementing the Clear Communications principles.
- Identifying and developing training sessions for focus areas requiring deeper skill development and practice (i.e., [data visualization](#)).
- Ensuring all resources were broadly available to everyone. (For us, this meant uploading them to a Clear Communications page on the company intranet).

How do you create organizational health literacy sustainability?

After your program is developed, you might be worried about how to sustain the momentum within your organization for the months and years ahead.

Internally keeping the focus a priority

Here are the focus areas we prioritized to ensure the Clear Communications initiative we started remains a priority at Fingerprint:

- Continue supporting professional development activities such as offering access to IHA Health Literacy Solutions Center blogs and webinars, and providing colleagues with the opportunity to complete the [Health Literacy Specialist Certificate Program](#).
- Assign Clear Communications mentors from across all disciplines to familiarize colleagues with the tools and principles we developed and to guide them in applying them in their day-to-day work.
- Keep up the training! We hope to host further trainings for new colleagues as they join us, as well as more in-depth sessions for colleagues with a significant interest in the subject.
- Plan and recognize Health Literacy Month in October as an annual agency tradition.

Externally sharing enthusiasm and expertise

Sharing your enthusiasm and expertise around organizational health literacy with external audiences and stakeholders is perhaps the most important aspect of creating sustainability.

At Fingerprint, that means continuously looking for opportunities to incorporate the Clear Communications mission and expertise into our business model. But at your organization it may look more like this:

- Engaging with community partners/
- Advocating to update materials or processes.
- Taking initial steps to educate yourself and those around you about [health literacy inequities](#) and the value of Clear Communications to combat them.

About Fingerprint

Fingerprint is a full-service agency that creatively solves business and human problems to build stronger brands and experiences that help paint a healthy future.



About the Authors

Sierra Adler, MSc

Senior Copywriter, Fingerprint

Sierra Adler, MSc, is a Senior Copywriter on the creative team at Fingerprint, a Fingerprint Group Company, where she supports clients in creatively and clearly representing their product offerings to patients and healthcare providers. Prior to joining Fingerprint, Sierra worked in academia—researching, publishing, and serving as a liaison between academics and their external audiences. Her academic focus is on science communication with a specific emphasis on public health, scientifically informed community decision-making, and art as a medium for science communication.

Laura Wilson, MEd

SVP, Director of Patient Health Experience, Fingerprint

Laura Wilson, MEd, serves as SVP, Director of Patient Health Experience at Fingerprint, a Fingerprint Group Company, and has over 20 years of experience in healthcare communications. She has launched several health literacy initiatives for communications agencies and teams at pharmaceutical companies. Prior to this role, Laura worked for over a decade to develop and deliver education programs for local and national advocacy organizations. She has a master's degree in adult education from The Pennsylvania State University. In 2022, she completed the Health Literacy Specialist Certificate Program offered by the Institute for Healthcare Advancement.