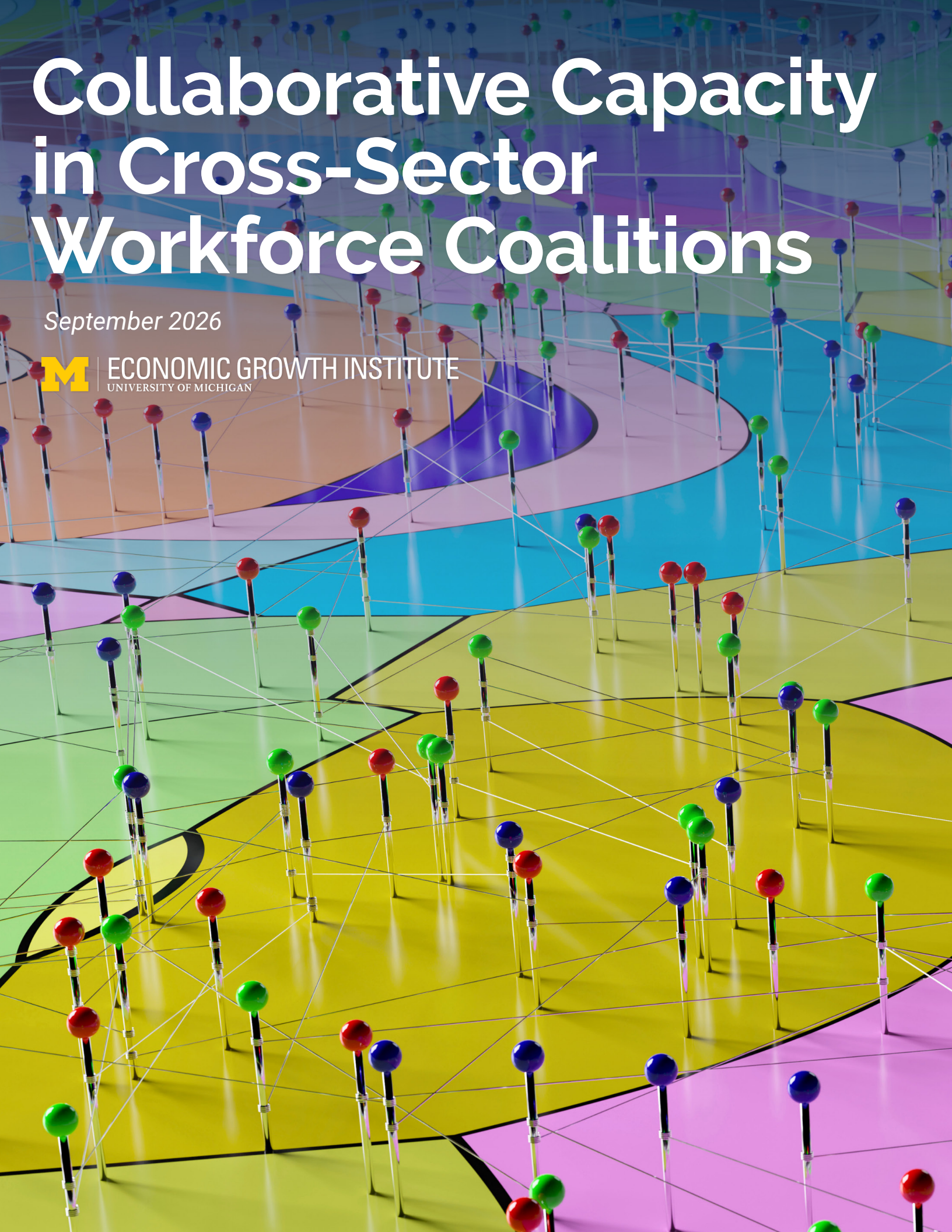




Collaborative Capacity in Cross-Sector Workforce Coalitions

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The New Growth Innovation Network (NGIN) is a knowledge, insight, and innovation hub, supporting economic development practitioners to advance inclusive economic growth in their region. Established in 2018, NGIN is a nonprofit organization focused on closing structural opportunity gaps to ensure that economically disenfranchised people of color, women, and neglected geographies are a core part of regional economic growth and prosperity. NGIN works to drive systemic change through the NGIN community of practitioners, its platform of insights, and innovations.

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Executive Summary

The U.S. Economic Development Administration (EDA) has worked to strengthen regional workforce ecosystems through federal investment in locally-driven, cross-sector collaborations. EDA's workforce program recently invested in 32 industry-led workforce training partnerships nationwide, to address talent shortages, training misalignments, and systemic economic vulnerabilities. Regions had agency to chart their own priorities, build new training pathways, and connect talent pools to high-paying jobs in high-demand industries.

This practitioner report draws on extensive research: 91 interviews with coalition leaders, participant feedback, program documentation, and progress reports. It captures lessons learned from implementation, with a focus on what drives collaboration and adaptive problem-solving especially in complex, uncertain environments.

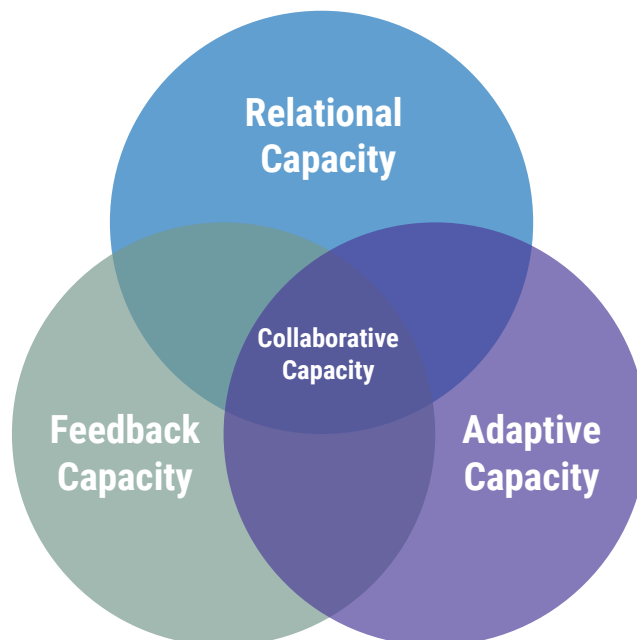
Key Findings

Research identified three collaborative capacities that shaped successful partnership work:

1. Relational Capacity: Strong, trust-based relationships are the backbone of collaborative impact. Partnerships thrive when leaders invest in relationship-building, honest communication, and sustained connection beyond formal agreements or compliance.

The recommendations below are grounded in practices coalitions identified as important to building and sustaining strong cross-sector relationships:

- Map partner value and fill capability gaps through intentional partnership design. Design coalition roles and networks to leverage the strengths and perspectives of all partners.
- Build relational density (multiple points of connection across organizations) to increase resilience and reduce bottlenecks.
- Spend time to get to know partners beyond formal roles, nurturing trust and responsiveness.



- Establish common language and definitions and routinely check for shared meaning.
- Revisit roles, contributions, and expectations as conditions change to maintain alignment.

2. Feedback Capacity: Effective coalitions routinely gather distributed expertise, share learning across organizations, and close the loop translating feedback into timely decisions and coordinated adjustments. Feedback is more than gathering information; it's about co-creating solutions and shared understanding.

The recommendations below reflect practices coalitions used to gather, interpret, and act on feedback across partners.:

- Establish and maintain open, direct, and boundary-spanning feedback channels.
- Build feedback loops that close the loop: reflect back what you heard, interpret it together, decide on next steps, and communicate what changed (or why it didn't) to all partners.
- Use feedback as a co-creation agenda during times of uncertainty or when the path forward is unclear.

3. Adaptive Capacity: The ability to pivot in response to emerging pressures and feedback is essential. Coalitions that engage in rapid iteration and small tests keep momentum, carry learning forward, and maintain trust as they adjust to changing conditions.

The recommendations below reflect practices coalitions described as important to responding to emerging pressures and adjusting implementation over time:

- Notice and name pressures early, engaging group input before small issues become major setbacks.
- Clarify through structured feedback loops, gathering context and interpreting challenges collectively.
- Try small, low-risk adjustments and evaluate their impact before scaling.
- Capture and share learning from changes; use debriefs and documentation to preserve adaptive knowledge.

4. Collaborative Capacity: These capacities come together to form Collaborative Capacity, the ability of coalitions to leverage the collective strengths of their group, stay aligned, learn together, and make coordinated changes in pursuit of common outcomes.

Collaborative Capacity enables partners to move beyond coordination, supporting resilience, ongoing learning, and sustained impact.

Coalitions that strengthen collaborative capacity are better positioned to stay aligned, learn quickly, and adjust course as conditions evolve, while keeping partners engaged and accountable to shared outcomes. Three cross-cutting patterns characterized coalitions with strong collaborative capacity:

1. Relationships are the infrastructure that makes feedback and adaptation possible (Relational → Feedback → Adaptive)

Trust and responsiveness determine whether partners share candid information early, respond to requests, and follow through on commitments. When relationships are strong, feedback travels faster and adjustments can be made without escalation or blame; when relationships are weak, even well-designed processes stall.

2. Co-created clarity turns feedback into coordinated action (Feedback + Relational → Adaptive).

Coalitions maintain momentum when they treat feedback as shared interpretation—clarifying definitions, assumptions, roles, and decision rules so partners act on the same understanding. This helps coalitions distinguish between misalignment and performance problems and makes pivots easier because partners can see the rationale and re-align quickly.

3. Flexible boundaries balance accountability with learning and experimentation (Relational + Adaptive, supported by Feedback).

Effective coalitions hold a clear line on what must remain consistent (shared outcomes, decision points, accountability, communication pathways) while allowing variation in how partners execute based on role, constraints, and context. This balance protects trust and ownership while enabling rapid iteration, scaling what works.

Introduction

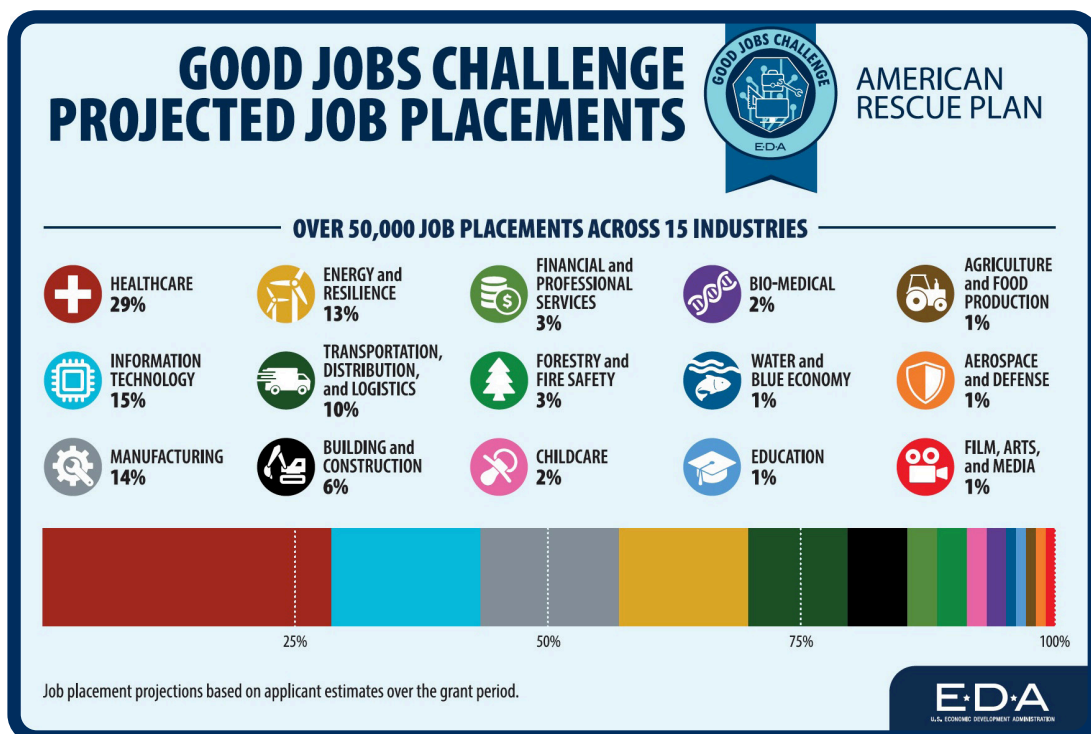
This report draws on lessons from one of the U.S. Economic Development Administration's (EDA) previous workforce development initiatives, the Good Jobs Challenge (GJC). Building on EDA's broader strategy to connect economic and workforce development through employer-driven, locally-driven approaches, this significant federal investment in regional workforce ecosystems is grounded in the belief that effective workforce solutions require cross-sector partnerships. Employers, education and training providers, public agencies, intermediaries, and community-based organizations (CBOs) must work collaboratively toward shared goals that benefit the region. This program reflects a broader shift toward locally-driven approaches that emphasize both economic recovery and long-term resilience.

With a goal of placing over 50,000 individuals into high-skilled jobs across 15 industries, the program was designed to improve longstanding vulnerabilities in regional economies, including talent shortages and misalignment between training systems and employer needs. The place-based approach empowered each region to identify its own economic priorities, develop tailored

plans, and implement cross-sector strategies suited to their unique demographic, social, and economic contexts. Across the country, funded coalitions built and expanded training pathways connecting participants to high-paying jobs in high-demand sectors such as healthcare, manufacturing, information technology, energy, and transportation, distribution, and logistics.

As part of a \$500 million investment, the EDA announced grant awards to 32 industry-led workforce training partnerships across the country in August of 2022. Because awards were made through a national, competitive process, the funded partnerships offer an especially instructive window into how regions organize, manage, and adapt partnership-based strategies in real time.

The insights in this report draw on research examining grantees' experiences implementing their initiatives. Findings illuminate practical approaches to sustaining collaboration, building feedback loops, and supporting continuous learning during implementation. It is intended for coalition leaders, employers, training providers, workforce agencies, community-based organizations, funders, and





Introduction

policymakers working to build and sustain workforce pathways in complex¹ regional systems. The evidence-informed patterns and practices described in this report can help strengthen execution readiness, accelerate learning, and promote long-term resilience across regions.

Cross-sector collaboration is increasingly central to workforce development because no single organization can design, deliver, and sustain pathways to high-wage jobs alone. Across interviews with EDA-funded partnerships, three collaborative capacities consistently shaped coalitions' ability to execute and adapt during implementation: relational capacity (trust and coordination), feedback capacity (shared information and sensemaking), and adaptive capacity (iteration and pivots under uncertainty). The sections that follow describe the research approach and present insights organized around these collaborative capacities. This report offers practical implications and recommendations for both coalition practice and future workforce investment strategies.

Methodological Approach

The purpose of this study was to identify the practices that supported grantees success in addressing localized economic distress. This report synthesizes these findings gathered from 3 phases of qualitative interviews with coalition leaders. We interviewed all 32 award recipients at least twice for a total of 91 interviews lasting 30-60 minutes. Interview insights were supplemented by grantee progress reports, publicly available program documents, and additional background research.

The research team uploaded interview transcripts to a coding software where we identified patterns and insights in the coalitions' approaches to expanding participants' access to high-paying jobs in their workforce development programs.

After the first two phases of data collection (Summer-Fall of 2023 and 2024) it was clear that three elements were consistently described as critical to their cross-sector partnership work: relationships, data, and pivoting. The third and final phase of data collection (Summer-Fall of 2025) focused on these themes to better understand the characteristics that promoted successful outcomes as identified by participants. This targeted inquiry led to novel insights into the relational and systemic dynamics that underpin sustainable changes in cross-sector partnerships.

Our findings offer practical implications for leadership in environments defined by uncertainty and complexity and point toward new directions for collaborative adaptive leadership in regional development.

Report Overview

This report distills research findings from this workforce program into actionable guidance for practitioners and coalition leaders. Drawing from real-world experiences shared by research participants, it highlights three essential collaborative capacities: relational, feedback, and adaptive. For each capacity, the report provides contextual background, practical strategies for strengthening that capacity, and positive and strained signals to help readers assess and improve coalition health.

Examples throughout the report are grounded in the lived experiences of program participants, offering authentic insights to inform cross-sector partnership work². Whether launching new initiatives or refining existing collaborations, this resource leverages composite interview insights for building resilient partnerships, diagnosing challenges, and adapting strategies for greater impact.

¹ Complex and complexity are used in this report to describe the interconnected nature of the coalitions' work. Different from complicated systems which have many different components, multiple right answers, and clear connection between cause and effect, in complex systems, components are interrelated, right answers are unknown, and solutions emerge from circumstances. For more information see Snowden & Boone, 2007.

² All examples and quotes have been deidentified to protect the privacy of the research participant.

Relational Capacity

Across all interviews, the importance of cross-sector relationships came up over and over as the single most important element to a program's success. To such an extent that how grantees understood their own success mirrored how they understood their relationships. Program leaders that felt successful in their projects attributed that success to strong relationships, while those who described not meeting their goals described relationships as strained, fragmented, or insufficiently developed.

Essential to operational infrastructure, relational capacity is the program leaders' ability to build, sustain, and repair cross-sector partnerships so coordination, accountability, and shared execution remain possible over time. High relational capacity enables reliable coordination, effective communication, faster problem solving, shared ownership, and sustained momentum.

Why Relational Capacity Matters

This EDA program intentionally supported regional workforce training systems through

evolving hiring needs, and the disconnect between employers and training providers make workforce development a moving target (Smith et al., 2025). Cross-sector partnerships support regions in dealing with this complexity by sharing resources, information, and capacity to implement timely and effective programs. However, this collaborative work requires strong relationships.

There is no way around the fact that this is about relationships. I have to be able to tell you. "Hey, we just basically secretly shopped for your HR system, and you're booting people out as soon as they hit submit. ... They have exactly what you said you needed." You can't have that conversation with a stranger ... You need them to pick up the phone. You need them to be willing to have an honest conversation with you.

This collective effort is critical as each partner's success depends on the success of another and the work can't be completed alone. Figure 1 outlines the interconnected nature described by coalition leaders. At the center of the graphic is the convening partner. This role is critical to building and sustaining partnerships across the effort. Employers also serve an important role as they

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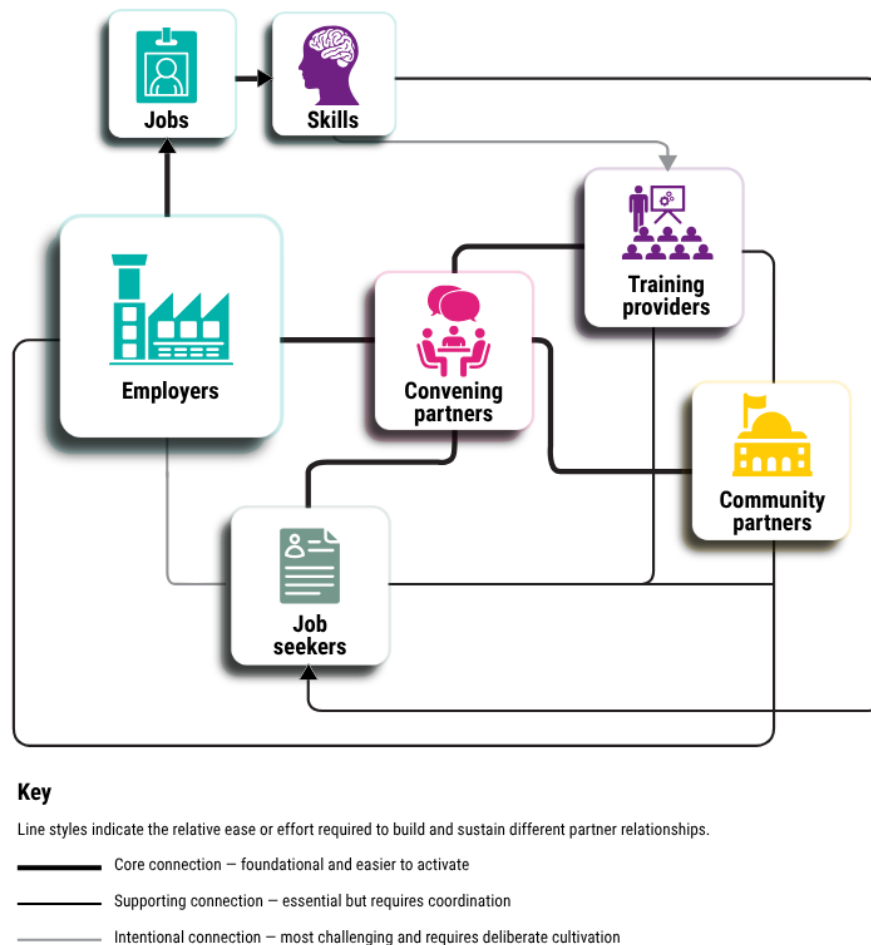
federal awards to build and strengthen the links between employers, training providers, community organizations, and trainees with the purpose of placing Americans into high-paying jobs. This goal is inherently a collective effort as no single organization can effectively implement workforce training and implementation on their own (Bryson et al., 2015). In fact, the most transformative workforce development initiatives are those that engage cross-sector partnerships that leverage the expertise, credibility, and capacity of their network (Clarke & Crane, 2018).

Today's workforce needs are increasingly complex. Rapid technological development, labor shortages,

determine which jobs need to be hired for and how many positions are needed, which determines the skills workers need to be successful in the role. However, often employers had difficulty translating the jobs into the implicit skills needed for curriculum development. Rather they needed the support of training providers who then translated the job requirements into skills, and those skills into an effective training curriculum. While sometimes available jobs required skills job seekers already possessed, training providers often served an essential purpose to upskill or build a talent pipeline of workers qualified for a job. Community partners served as liaisons to promote opportunities to untapped talent and provide additional wraparound



Figure 1: **Interdependent Partners**



services that made training possible within areas of economic distress.

Ultimately, each partner contributed unique value to the collective. When partners struggled to contribute, it inhibited the overall goal to get more people into high-paying jobs. Conversely when partners contributed value to the collective, the program overall benefited. In this way, partners are not just stakeholders to inform, but rather, valuable co-creators.

One of the biggest challenges with relational capacity was that following a process or checking boxes was not enough. Coalition leaders could follow all the best practices of partner engagement and sometimes partnerships still failed to achieve the desired outcomes. Amidst uncertainty, coalition leaders needed to pay attention to signals that their partner relationships were going in the right direction or identify misalignments and areas of disengagement

early. Learning from their experiences, we will explore these indicators and the practices that supported relational capacity in many of these programs.

How to Build Relational Capacity

Strong partnerships require deliberate choices about who to involve, how to structure relationships, and what shared understanding is needed. When asked what made their partnerships work, coalition leaders pointed to specific moments and practices that built trust, clarified expectations, and created space for honest problem-solving. Three themes emerged consistently across these conversations: designing the right partnership network, investing in relationships beyond formal roles, and continuously negotiating shared meaning. Each theme translates into concrete practices that coalitions can adopt to build and sustain relational capacity.

Who's Involved: Design the Partnership Network

The EDA's workforce program offered a unique opportunity to fund cross-sector partnerships. While Figure 1 offers a simplified visual representation of how partners depended on one another, each group (e.g., training providers, community partners, employers) could be representative of multiple organizations. These projects needed to get specific about the types of partnerships that would best serve their collective goal and build a partnership ecosystem that had the necessary resources, skills, and expertise across sectors. To be resilient, these cross-sector connections also needed multiple strong points of connections across organizations.

Recommendation: Map partner value and identify gaps.

When forming cross-sector partnerships, lead organizations should define the necessary components for success (perspectives, skills, and expertise) and identify the most effective partner to support. For existing partnerships, an assessment of each partner's contributions helps identify component alignment and where intentional partner engagement is needed.

While initial planning and early strategy development can be within the lead organization, partner value should never be assumed. Leading organizations may assume partners can bring a strength they do not have. For example, assuming a community organization can promote workforce development opportunities to the untapped talent population the group has targeted, may not be effective if the organization's focus is not aligned with workforce development. Leaders should confirm the value they are seeking from the partnership, rather than assume based on past work together or experiences from other projects. For this reason, co-creating a partnership value map with others better supports identifying an organization's strengths.

When coalitions understand and communicate each partner's value and contribution, the ownership expands to collective leadership and action. Each partner can leverage their unique expertise as a value-creating co-contributor, rather than an informed stakeholder.

Example: Partnership Design for Returning Citizens

Regional Context: The county is home to a large population of returning citizens, many of whom face significant barriers following release from incarceration.

Goal: Expand access to healthcare training programs for returning citizens, both to support their successful entry into stable employment and to address local workforce shortages in the healthcare sector.

Expertise, skills, or support needed:

- Specialized case management, including support with transportation and housing
- Guidance navigating barriers unique to people exiting incarceration
- Coordination across organizations to provide wraparound services

How the Partnership Evolved: Initial efforts attempted to serve returning citizens through existing training providers and community partners but quickly revealed gaps. As one coalition leader shared,

"We tried to help two people coming directly out of the county jail who wanted to be community health workers. And it was a complete disaster. We weren't trained for this, and the colleges weren't either."

The experience showed that returning citizens could not simply be folded into the existing training pathway without additional supports. Participants faced reentry-related needs and employment barriers that required specialized knowledge beyond what the coalition and colleges were prepared to provide.

Recognizing these limitations, the coalition identified the need for a dedicated partner with capabilities to support returning citizens, including transportation, housing support, and case management. They identified an organization to meet these critical needs following discharge from the county jails. This shift allowed the initiative to offer a more resilient, connected partnership network capable of supporting participants in the elements that make training possible.

Recommendation: Build relational density to increase resilience.

While formal agreements can connect organizations across sectors, the most productive relationships happen between the people within them. One strong personal connection can be the start to a successful cross-sector partnership. When coalitions build on this element of relational capacity by supporting multiple connections across organizations, partnerships benefit from stronger feedback mechanisms, less dependence on a single person, and more durable partnerships over time.

When partnerships rely on a single connector, coordination and feedback pathways are fragile. For example, if a data lead noticed an early attendance dip, a single-thread partnership may rely on the director's escalation to the community-based organization partner. In this case, information flow can get stuck, blocking the agency of people closest to the work.

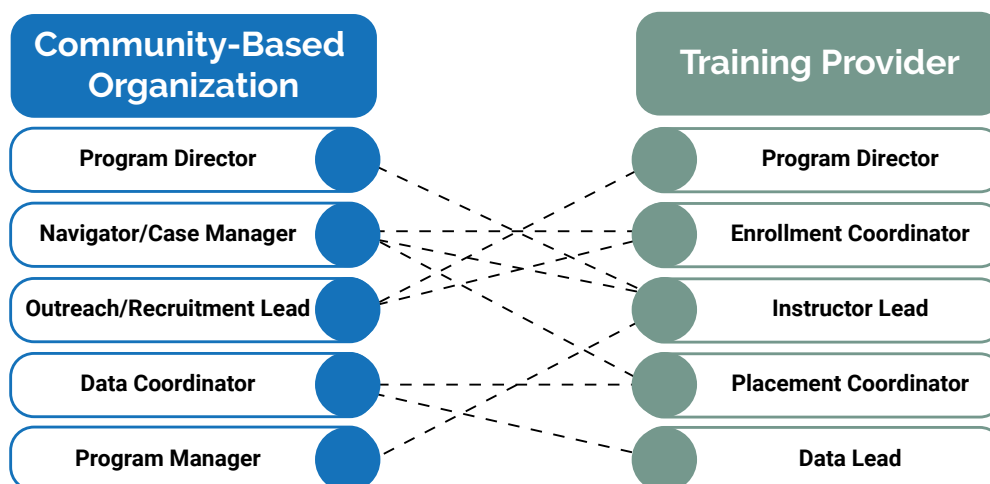
Conversely, when a partnership has relational density, the data and navigator lead could connect directly to compare insights and adjust supports right away as information flows directly to the relevant parties supporting their agency and ownership of their work.

Figure 2 demonstrates how dense cross-organization connections create multiple routes for communication and problem-solving, reducing bottlenecks and sustaining collaboration through staff turnover or disruption. To build multiple points of connection, coalitions should include staff from relevant departments in cross-organizational planning and problem-solving and encourage relational investment at all levels. For example, some coalitions created cross-partner working groups (e.g., recruitment/intake, training delivery, employer engagement, data/reporting) with relevant counterparts from different organizations so problem-solving could happen together on a regular basis.

Who are They: Invest in Understanding and Trust

While understanding a partner's unique contributions starts to build awareness of their role within the collective, it does not guarantee successful collaboration. Coalition leaders emphasized that partner responsiveness was highest when they see value in the work and when they trust the person. Prominent federal awards like these have many compliance tasks and deliverables that require partners to respond to messages and provide data and information in a timely manner. Partners were more likely to respond to people they knew and trusted. To build this relational capacity, coalition leaders described the importance of getting to know their partners beyond their formal roles.

Figure 2: Strong Relational Density Across Organizations



Relational Capacity

We've been nurturing these relationships with partners since this began ... Even little things like going out to lunch together, going out to dinner when we're at the same things, texting ... just really trying to become work friends. I'm not gonna say we're besties but really making an effort to make everyone feel really involved, important, and cared for, and really highlighting how much their involvement impacts their communities and other communities.

Coalition leaders found that making relationship building a priority, particularly early in the program, was fundamentally important to a successful collaboration. This finding aligns with collaborative governance literature, which emphasizes dialogue among cross-sector partners as a key process for building the trust needed to support shared understanding and commitment (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Emerson et al., 2012). Subsequent collaborative initiatives benefit from developed relationships as residual trust makes it easier to establish shared understanding and commitment (Bryson et al., 2015).

Recommendation: Spend time to get to know each other beyond the partnership.

It requires time to build the relational conditions that allow honest communication and reliable coordination. Project deadlines and urgency to meet outcomes can get in the way of early relational investments that can reduce friction and misunderstandings later. Relational investment builds trust over time, compounding into more streamlined

not surface the concern until after enrollment goals are missed at which point the coalition has less time and fewer options to respond. In a relationship with trust, the coordinator is more likely to flag the risk early, giving partners time to adjust outreach strategy, strengthen screening and coaching, and align expectations before the problem impacts their numbers.

Building relationships can happen in small moments. For example, taking time at the beginning or end of a meeting to talk informally, eating lunch with collaborators at a conference, or carpooling with partners to site visits all create opportunities to get to know partners outside of the task of the moment. Relationships can also be built through more structured moments like a partner retreat, ice breakers during meetings, or scheduled events. Regardless of the method, investing in relational capacity builds familiarity that makes it easier to share honest feedback.

Who are We: Continually Negotiate Shared Meaning and Alignment

Alignment around a shared goal supports collective action. For these initiatives, their overall focus on workforce development involved expanding access to the workforce and increasing labor participation by placing participants into high-paying jobs. However, each region had unique challenges, needs, and labor contexts to address in order to reach their goal. Some programs targeted rural counties that span

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communication and understanding to support group alignment. Conversely, skipping relational investment can lead to undetected misunderstandings that can limit the partnership's future success.

For example, consider a new partnership with a local training provider responsible for recruitment in collaboration with a community-based organization. The provider's outreach coordinator believes enrollment targets are too high given the program prerequisites. However, the outreach coordinator is eager to make a positive impression and worries that raising concerns will make them look ineffective. Without established rapport, the coordinator may

a large geographic area and do not have strong transportation infrastructure. Others served a large population of people with unique needs (e.g., veterans, people recovering from substance abuse). Coalition leaders designed their program goals to address their area's unique positioning and meet the needs of those they serve.

To collectively work towards their shared goal, cross-sector partnerships needed to gain shared meaning and process alignment. Through outlining who they are as a partnership, coalitions could better contribute for the collective benefit.

Recommendation: Build shared interpretation and maintain it over time.

In cross-sector workforce partnerships, misalignment often hides in plain sight. Partners may use the same language while holding different assumptions about what the terms mean, what progress looks like, and who is responsible for which parts of the work. If left unaddressed, these differences surface later when timelines are tighter, stakes are higher, and adjustments are harder.

1. Establish a common language by defining key concepts, roles, and success metrics early.

Early alignment starts with naming the terms and measures that will guide day-to-day decisions. This includes establishing a common language; even seemingly small things like acronyms can cause confusion when partners come from different sectors and organizational cultures. For example, training providers often track completion as a primary success metric. Completion of training matters, but it does not automatically translate into job placement, which is the broader aim of this EDA program. Even more, a training provider, a community organization, and an employer may all use the word “placement,” but mean entirely different things by it. Coalitions can reduce downstream confusion by agreeing early on the meanings of key terms and how they will be tracked. For example,

- Placement: What counts? When? Where? Quality thresholds?
- Completion: Completion of course hours, credential, work-based learning
- Retention: 30/60/90 days, sustained employment
- Wraparound supports: What qualifies, who provides services, what gets documented?
- Target populations/Eligibility: Criteria and documentation
- Enrollment/Participation
- Job Criteria: Wages, benefits, schedule stability, advancement opportunities

This kind of early definitional work supports systems of shared meaning, so when partners use the same language, they are more likely to be referring to the same thing.

2. Build systems for continual communication and alignment.

Even after early alignment, coordination improves when coalitions consistently confirm understanding

across time and channels. In complex work, clarity is not a one-time event; it’s a practice. Leaders can assume that messages will be interpreted differently across organizations and roles. To support shared interpretation, partnerships should build repetition and checking for understanding throughout their workflow. For example,

- Make space for clarifying questions and check interpretation even when there are none
- Document key decisions and definitions in plain language
- Be mindful of acronym use. If used, describe the meaning in case there are people present who are not familiar with the shortened version.
- Make decisions visible by using shared trackers, standing meeting notes, etc.
- Reinforce expectations by sharing progress on goals and outlining next steps

3. Revisit roles, contributions, and expectations as conditions change

Cross-sector partnerships will inevitably encounter changes like staff turnover, shifting organizational priorities, new reporting guidance, employer needs, industry advancements, and unexpected implementation barriers. As the context shifts, partnership roles and contributions may also need to change, along with expectations for what “success” looks like in each phase of work.

Coalitions should normalize these adjustments as part of continual alignment. This doesn’t require renegotiating everything. It means creating periodic moments to ask:

- What has changed since we last clarified roles and commitments?
- Are responsibilities still matched to capacity and the work’s current needs?
- Do our success expectations still fit the phase and constraints we’re in?
- What needs to be re-owned, re-routed, or resourced differently?
- Are the right people attending the meetings to make progress on our goals?
- Are industry needs still the same or have they changed?
- Have partner resources changed?

Forming a common language, developing work practices that improve clarity, and revisiting roles and commitments are critical practices that build and maintain a shared interpretation. This fosters trust and momentum, fundamental components of relational capacity.

Indicators of Relational Capacity

Relational capacity shows up in observable patterns of connection, communication, and follow-through especially when conditions shift, tensions arise, or timelines tighten. Table 1 is designed as a quick diagnostic tool. Coalitions can use it to identify healthy and strained signals of relational capacity, name potential causes of the strain, and implement small relational investments that build relational capacity.

How to use these indicators: Look for patterns over time. A single missed deadline or tense moment does not indicate low relational capacity. Repeated delays, bottlenecks, or consistent misunderstandings (especially across multiple partners) often do.

Table 1 *Relational Capacity: Healthy vs. Strained Signals*

Healthy Signals	Strained Signals	Likely Causes	What to Try
When something slows down, partners can quickly identify <i>where</i> it's stuck and <i>who</i> needs to connect to unblock it. The roles closest to the bottleneck can reach each other directly and resolve issues without unnecessary routing.	Work repeatedly stalls at the same handoffs (e.g., recruitment → intake, supports → attendance, data → decisions). Addressing problems moves slowly because communication has to travel up and down hierarchies or through a single connector.	• Missing role-to-role connections • Over-reliance on a single trusted connector • Hierarchy-dependent communication pathways	Identify primary and backup contact per organization. Identify where work routinely slows down, then connect the roles from both sides so issues can be solved at the right level. Regularly share how problems were solved and design improvements for the next time.
Partnership can name who holds the critical expertise (training design, outreach, supports, employer engagement, data/outcomes) and those people are actively involved in the work where their expertise is needed so specialized knowledge informs decisions (e.g., employer needs shape training; data insights shape outreach; participant barriers shape supports).	Small set of partners make most decisions because key expertise is missing, underutilized, or disconnected from decision points. Specialized knowledge stays siloed (e.g., data is reported but not acted on; employer feedback doesn't reach curriculum; participant barriers don't reshape supports). Problems become visible only after they show up in lagging outcomes.	• Capability gaps (missing expertise) • Expertise present but siloed or underutilized • Decision points disconnected from expertise • Overextended convening capacity	Identify 1–2 missing or weak capabilities and decide whether to recruit a new partner, elevate an existing partner's role, or add specific individuals to working sessions. In meetings, ask: "Whose expertise do we need in the room for this decision?"
Group members regularly surface concerns while there is still time to adjust. People name constraints candidly because trust and intent are assumed.	Risks stay unspoken until targets are missed or tension spikes. Updates stay "safe" and polished; real concerns surface in side conversations (or not at all).	• Trust not yet established • Fear of blame or reputational risk • Lack of relationship beyond the task • Uncertainty about what's safe to raise	In partner conversations, have an agenda item to surface potential challenges that can be identified early-on. Formulate ways to address challenges proactively to signal follow-up to concerns.
Partners invest in connection outside formal settings (quick check-ins, informal touchpoints). Appreciation and credit-sharing reinforce reciprocity; engagement feels like co-ownership.	Partners show up for required meetings and connection feels surface level. Appreciation and credit-sharing is rare, and engagement feels like compliance rather than collaboration.	• Relationship limited to the task • Overemphasis on efficiency • No shared rituals for recognition • Limited time for human connection • Low perceived reciprocity (e.g., we give more than we get)	Utilize opportunities outside of the formal project to build trust and relationships with partners. Create time during partner meetings to recognize the contributions of different partners on a regular basis (quarterly or biannually).
Messages are acknowledged quickly, even if the full answer comes later. Partners provide proactive updates when timelines slip and close loops on commitments.	Silence is common and follow-through requires chasing. Partners interpret silence or delays as lack of commitment rather than capacity constraints. Slips happen without notice or until it is a bigger problem requiring escalation without intermediate repair steps.	• Avoidance due to tension or uncertainty • Assumptions replacing clarification • Low relational accountability (no mutual expectation) • Competing priorities not safely nameable • Trust too thin to renegotiate timelines	Inquire about partner capacity on a regular basis, especially after staff changes or changes in scopes of work. Clarify expectations, and when possible, define them collaboratively.
Partners leave meetings with the same understanding of what was decided, who owns what, and what happens next. Data reporting updates are used for program improvement and adjustment.	Work products regularly bounce back due to mismatched expectations (e.g., That's not what we asked for, that's not what counts, that's not the format we need). Reporting requires repeated time-consuming reconciliation meetings just to make numbers comparable.	• Key terms not aligned • Unspoken assumptions about "what counts" • Hesitancy to ask clarifying questions • Low trust in others' numbers or methods • Shared meaning not maintained as context shifts	Agree on key terms and maintain a glossary, if appropriate. Use it as reference after key staff changes or changes in scopes of work.



Feedback Capacity

Strong relationships create the conditions for collaboration, but it is the flow of information through those relationships that enables partnerships to learn, adapt, and improve. Across interviews, coalition leaders consistently identified gathering and utilizing information across partners and organizations as essential to program success. Regular meetings were the most common mechanism for gathering feedback, whether through one-on-one or group conversations. However, though the mechanism was the same, some leaders described interactions where information flowed steadily across the group, while others found the flow of feedback more challenging.

Essential to dealing with complexity, feedback capacity describes a group's ability to routinely collect distributed expertise, interpret it, and leverage it to improve the program or adapt to emerging tensions. In complex workforce partnerships, feedback loops help cross-sector partners stay coordinated through uncertainty and emergent learning. They involve

partnerships can work together to identify what practices are working and which need refinement. It increases the likelihood of catching misalignments and challenges early so the partnership can pivot. As one coalition leader described,

We spent a lot of time inviting the data folks and the reporting folks into the technical assistance conversations, because they were actually very separate from those conversations. And it was a big question for me as to why? So that invitation opened up an opportunity to say, "Wow, we see some big opportunities to fix this data reporting so that data doesn't take the ... capacity of everybody such that they don't have the energy to do and implement anything else."

Conversely, when feedback loops are weak, information struggles to flow within the coalition work. One interview participant described this challenge in their work.

“ We spent a lot of time inviting the data folks and the reporting folks into the technical assistance conversations, because they were actually very separate from those conversations. And it was a big question for me as to why? So that invitation opened up an opportunity to say, 'Wow, we see some big opportunities to fix this data reporting so that data doesn't take the ... capacity of everybody such that they don't have the energy to do and implement anything else.' ”

capturing signals, interpreting the information, and closing the loop through data-informed action.

Why Feedback Capacity Matters

Workforce development coalitions require cross-sector knowledge to address emergent challenges and success. No single entity is able to know what is happening across the entire system on their own (Bryson et al., 2006). Partners each hold different vantage points that change as the context changes. For example, employers see the impacts of curriculum changes on new employee preparedness, participants know whether new supports are going to make training possible, and training providers recognize whether a new training format is supporting the learning. Feedback loops gather these distinct vantage points, share learning across the partnership, and translate learning into data-informed decisions where necessary (Chirumalla et al., 2018).

When feedback loops are strong, cross-sector

The business services team wasn't allowed to communicate directly with the navigators. It has to go through the chain of command. It's very hierarchical ... So now, instead of being efficient and moving directly to the person who can get the business engaged, they have to move through the hierarchy ... How is somebody supposed to transition across these modalities of education and training that are really necessary for rural folks when the registration and the financial systems are completely separate, and the people aren't speaking to one another?

Successful partnerships that engage stakeholders in co-creation require feedback loops to share ownership. With various stakeholder perspectives coming together to develop workforce opportunities, each partner has a valuable perspective that is positioned within the broader coalition. Closing the loop shares feedback across the collective so that group members can identify how their voice shaped decisions and where other voices brought additional context. For example, as partners co-create a new training pathway, the convener shares back what employers, training staff,

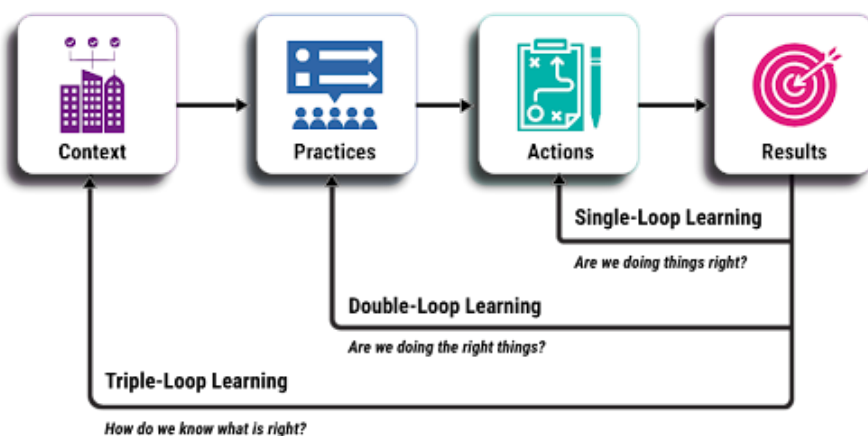
and community partners contributed and links those contributions to the decisions the coalition makes so everyone can see how their perspective and input shaped and refined the design.

When sharing feedback is an established practice, it can support group accountability. Coalition leaders felt their partners genuinely wanted to positively contribute to the group's shared goal of getting people into high-paying jobs. By consistently sharing data (e.g., participation feedback survey results, partner survey results, job placement numbers), coalitions created shared visibility that helped each partner identify where their own approach might need to shift and make adjustments in service of the collective goal. For example, when monthly placement and participant feedback results are shared across the coalition, partners can see where enrollment is strong, but completions are slipping. From this shared perspective, group members can individually respond by adjusting outreach, support, or instruction. In this way, accountability feels like shared troubleshooting rather than blame.

How to Build Feedback Capacity

Establishing feedback capacity requires more than implementing a survey; it requires deliberate practices that facilitate the routine flow of information within a coalition's operational framework. The recommendations outlined below offer concrete strategies for partnerships to improve the collection, interpretation, and response to feedback, ultimately fostering a culture where learning is seen as a shared, ongoing resource rather than an episodic endeavor.

Figure 3: Triple Loop Learning



Adapted from Ramalingam et al., 2009; Roche, 2009; Snell & Chak, 1998

Recommendation: Use feedback loops to deepen learning.

While feedback can serve the purpose of streamlining or improving operations, it can also serve collective learning on a deeper level. A useful framework for conceptualizing the levels of learning in cross-sector partnerships is triple loop learning (Ramalingam et al., 2009; Roche, 2009; Snell & Chak, 1998).

Figure 3 demonstrates that single loop learning is the clearest connection from action to results. It answers the question, are we doing things right? Double loop learning zooms out to start with the underlying assumptions that may inform the approaches used by the coalition. It answers the question, are we doing the right things? Triple loop learning zooms out even further to start with the context that forms the foundational principles of the approach. It answers the question, how do we decide what's right? Engaging these three levels bridges feedback as information to feedback as improvement and adaptation.

Across interviews, partners and coalition leaders most frequently described single loop (operational troubleshooting) and double loop (reflecting on assumptions and purpose) learning in their day-to-day work. Triple loop learning (systemic reflection on foundational values, principles, or context) was present in a smaller number of examples, typically emerging during the formation of the coalition or in moments of reflection on the core mission and vision.

For example, a cross-sector partnership is required to collect data and report outcomes across multiple partners. Over time, the convening partner hears from frontline staff that the process is burdensome. They also notice that some data is missing, numbers don't add up correctly across partners, and some data arrives late, making it difficult to confidently utilize the numbers for decisions. Single, double, and triple loop learning can deepen the partnership's feedback capacity by clarifying what to adjust, what to rethink, and how to learn together.

Learning Loops in Action

By mapping levels of learning to collaboration functions and intentionally triggering the right mode of learning for the task at hand, coalitions can drive both efficiency and alignment, while also safeguarding space for transformative system-level innovation.

SINGLE LOOP LEARNING

How do we collect data more reliably right now?

WHAT IT MEANS

At this level, information serves the purpose of operational adjustments and helps the partnership identify behaviors and practices that lead to better outcomes. To improve data collection, partners may create standardized intake forms, offer office hours for staff completing data entry, or clarify collection processes and responsibilities to ensure numbers are accurate and timely. These operational adjustments improve the data collection process.

BEST WHEN

Improving day-to-day operations, troubleshooting processes, or responding to procedural challenges.

HOW TO ACTIVATE IT

- Monitor key metrics closely and make routine adjustments to improve efficiency or workflow.
- Regularly review processes retrospectively to identify and resolve recurring operational challenges.
- Apply quick pilot tests or adjustments to workflows, forms, data collection processes, or communication routines based on feedback from multiple vantage points (e.g., frontline staff, participants, leadership).

DOUBLE LOOP LEARNING

Are we collecting the right data for the right purpose?

WHAT IT MEANS

At this level, information supports a deeper function of understanding whether the approach itself is leading to the kinds of decisions and actions that then lead to the desired results. In this case, the partnership may need to revisit assumptions about what the data is for and what types of data best reflect that purpose. As a result, they may clarify what counts as key outcomes, align definitions across partners, or reduce and prioritize the most impactful data points that help them tell their story and guide improvement. Exploring the underlying assumptions helps the partnership redesign their approach.

BEST WHEN

Aligning governance, clarifying decision rules, or realigning strategies during project transitions, evaluation cycles, or when persistent challenges arise.

HOW TO ACTIVATE IT

- Make "Are we doing the right things?" a routine agenda item during quarterly or annual meetings, not just when things go wrong.
- If the group keeps solving the same problem or revisiting the same roadblocks, pause to ask: What beliefs or rules are guiding our actions? Do they still fit our goals, our partners, or the context?
- Use facilitated sessions or ask an outside advisor to help surface unspoken assumptions as sometimes it's easier for someone outside the group to prompt these conversations.

TIP

If you haven't done this before, start small: pick one recurring challenge, and ask the team to brainstorm possible hidden assumptions, then test one adjustment for a set period.

TRIPLE LOOP LEARNING

What does good data look like and how do we decide what it means?

WHAT IT MEANS

At this level, information serves a more systemic purpose to understand the underlying perceptions that are guiding the overall goal. For partnerships improving their data collection process, this may mean exploring the principles that underlie why data is important and how the data informs their practice. As a result, they may set shared practices around thresholds for action (e.g., if completion drops more than 10% the program team needs to discuss and determine next steps). By identifying how they learn together and decide what is right, the collective can align their expectations for data quality and use, so data collection functions as a trusted tool.

BEST WHEN

Rethinking the coalition's mission, values, or foundational structures during strategic planning, major pivots, onboarding new partners, or when broader shifts occur.

HOW TO ACTIVATE IT

- Facilitate an annual big questions session: What are we trying to achieve as a coalition? Are our values and vision still fit for the current environment?
- Use prompts like "Why do we exist as a partnership?" or "Why is our success important to our region?" to shift the conversation from tactics to purpose.
- Invite all partners to map out how their roles and contributions relate to the coalition's deeper purpose.

TIP

If this feels abstract, start with a purpose statement exercise. Ask coalition members to write down what the partnership is for and compare answers. The gaps and commonalities can reveal important insights.

Recommendation: Establish and maintain shared mechanisms for direct and open feedback channels.

Regular meetings and touchpoints are one common mechanism coalitions use to both surface and share feedback from partners, employers, and participants. The specific mechanism matters less than the shared practice. Coalitions build feedback capacity when they create predictable spaces where people can name what they are seeing, interpret signals together, and decide what to do next.

Regardless of the format, effective feedback channels tend to be open, direct, and boundary-spanning.

- Open feedback channels make it normal and acceptable for information to move across organizational boundaries and levels of hierarchy. They reduce the tendency for concerns to be filtered, softened, or delayed as they move upward.
- Direct feedback channels shorten the path between the people closest to the work and the people who can act. They make it easier for employer-facing staff, navigators, instructors, and data leads to share timely insights without relying on back channels or waiting for escalation.
- Boundary-spanning feedback channels create structured pathways for multiple perspectives (employers, participants, community members) to move through the coalition and reach decision-makers. Without these pathways, the coalition risks making decisions based on what is already known, missing critical signals from the people closest to the work.

When feedback channels are boundary-spanning, open, and direct, coalitions can leverage information for the benefit of the initiative. Early information travels far enough, fast enough, to shape decisions before small issues become larger problems.

Recommendation: Close the feedback loop.

Closing the feedback loop means ensuring feedback leads to shared understanding, visible movement, and continued learning, even when the next step is unclear. Loop closure goes beyond collecting input

to make clear what was heard, what it means, and what happens next. This process is also a relational practice as it signals that partners' perspectives are valued and that their input shapes collective understanding, even when it does not lead to an immediate change.

Essential close-the-loop behaviors:

- Reflect back what you heard in plain language and invite partners to confirm or clarify.
- Share feedback findings back with the people who contributed them and anyone who may find that information valuable.
- Bring multiple perspectives into interpretation (frontline insight, employer input, participant experience, data trends) to inform understanding.
- Leverage feedback as a co-creation agenda when the path forward is unclear. Use it to convene the right partners to interpret the data and shape the response together.
- Share the steps that have been taken based on the feedback. Make the connection visible when feedback influences the group's direction whether through a decision, a redesign, or a shift in shared priorities.

Direct feedback channels often surface issues before the data shifts. The example below shows how a coalition can close the loop by validating the tension, gathering context, and returning to it with shared clarity.

Example

A coalition hears from navigators that participants are increasingly confused about eligibility documentation. In the next partner meeting, the coalition shares the concern and asks partners to confirm whether they are seeing the same pattern. The group decides to track documentation questions and collect more examples. At the next meeting, they adjust the workflow so navigators review documentation requirements with participants before intake, so participants complete only the relevant forms, reducing delays and incomplete submissions. The convening partner thanks the navigators for surfacing the issue early and improving the participant experience.

Indicators of Feedback Capacity

Feedback capacity is strong when information flows freely externally across organizations where partners share their unique vantage points for the betterment of the collective. Those perspectives are then funneled internally within an organization feeding into and informing their work. Table 2 identifies common healthy and strained signals of feedback capacity, names potential causes of the strain and suggests practices for building feedback capacity.

Table 2 *Feedback Capacity: Healthy vs. Strained Signals*

Healthy Signals	Strained Signals	Likely Causes	What to Try
Early signals surface routinely from the people closest to the work (e.g., navigators, instructors, employer-facing staff, data leads) because they trust their observations will be welcomed and will shape how the coalition responds.	People closest to the work stop sharing early insights because prior experience has taught them that concerns stall, are not acknowledged, or rarely shape what happens next.	- Frontline insights not represented in final decision making - No direct channel from frontline-facing roles to decision spaces - Loop closure inconsistent	Schedule regular touchpoints with different frontline stakeholders in your coalition. Invite reflections on what is working well, what is not, and ideas for improvements. Ensure that feedback is utilized to improve program design and close the loop by sharing back with stakeholders how their feedback was utilized.
Partners regularly use feedback to engage in shared sensemaking. Coalition touchpoints include time to interpret what signals mean, compare perspectives, and clarify what may be driving emerging patterns before deciding next steps.	Feedback is gathered but not revisited with depth. Partners remember offering input, but there is little shared sensemaking about what it meant, what the group learned, or what it implies for next steps, so feedback feels like one-way communication rather than a learning process.	- Feedback collected without a shared interpretation - Single-loop focus only (tweaks) without double/triple-loop reflection when needed - Multiple perspectives gathered but not integrated - Loop closure behavior missing	Schedule annual or bi-annual reflection points for double and triple loop learning Use the insights to codesign adjustments needed.
Feedback moves across organizational boundaries and levels. This flow supports timely coordination where partners translate what they are noticing into collective discussion, shared decisions, and follow-through.	When ideas are raised about improving the participant experience, input gets stuck in the hierarchy. Concerns move through layers, arrive late, or get diluted along the way, limiting the coalition's ability to respond and adapt.	- Feedback channels not open across levels - Feedback pathways too indirect - Information bottlenecks	Utilize relational capacity to establish multiple channels for boundary-spanning, two-way feedback. Encourage stakeholders to share feedback both formally and informally across organizations.
Partners generally show buy-in to coalition processes because they have been invited into interpretation and decision conversations. Even when the final direction differs from an individual partner's initial preference, they can explain the rationale, see how their input influenced the outcome, and remain engaged.	Partners experience decisions as disconnected from key context in their day-to-day work. When changes are introduced without that context, partners comply unevenly or prioritize what they believe is most workable, reducing shared ownership and follow-through.	- Loop closure treated as announcement, not shared understanding - Feedback not used to support co-creation when the next step is unclear - Partners can't see how input shaped direction - Interpretation and decision conversations happen in separate spaces	Utilize feedback as an opportunity to improve shared understanding and refine and co-design solutions that work for multiple stakeholders. Close the loop by highlighting how the feedback was utilized in the final outcome. Encourage stakeholders to test something small for a limited time if there is no clear consensus to keep momentum on projects (adaptive capacity).



Adaptive Capacity

Relational capacity is the strength of trust and communication between partners, the foundation that enables them to share candid information and act on it together. Feedback capacity is the systems and practices a coalition uses to gather, interpret, and act on information from across the partnership. Together, these two capacities enable adaptive action.

Across all phases of their project implementation, coalition leaders described the importance of pivoting in response to stakeholder feedback and external pressures or disruptions. This adaptive capacity allowed programs to remain relevant and effective even as circumstances changed. Intentional data-informed pivots allowed programs to meet participants where they are, address emerging obstacles, and adjust to shifting industry requirements.

In complex environments, adaptive capacity is a critical ability to translate uncertainty into coordinated action through small tests and iteration. When partners share timely information and try adjustments together, they can learn quickly, scale what works, and keep moving forward while maintaining coordination and trust.

experienced that could have gotten in the way of getting people into high-paying jobs if not addressed. Cross-sector partnerships with flexible strategies allowed coalitions to manage unexpected events that could otherwise derail their efforts.

Even the best planned strategies will inevitably encounter uncertainty and change within the initiative. As a coalition leader described

I think if you're engaged in that type of effort, you need to understand that it's not going to work out exactly how you have it described in the grant application. The timeline's going to change, the partners might change, the structure of the work might change, and you need to be prepared for that, and your partners need to understand that some things that you're going to try are not going to work, and that you're going to need to pivot, and they need to be supportive of that, because without that, like we said, it won't work.

Adaptive capacity leverages learning and iteration to prevent small issues from compounding into major setbacks. Partnerships that can recognize pressures and leverage their network to adapt early can maintain momentum, reduce rework, and build trust throughout the process.

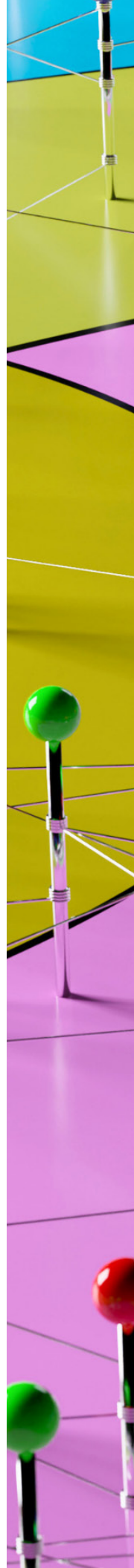
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Why Adaptive Capacity Matters

Successful workforce development strategies required addressing what was unanticipated and what was changing. Natural hazards that destroy job seekers' housing, requests for proposals that do not yield the needed expertise, expectations around partnership responsibilities that are misaligned, and emerging technology that is slower than expected, are all examples of pressures coalition leaders

How to Build Adaptive Capacity

Adaptive capacity leverages relational and feedback capacity to identify and interpret emerging pressures. It supports the partnership's ability to translate learnings into coordinated adjustments. Adjustments are then assessed and fed into subsequent feedback loops to further systemic learning. As one coalition leader described the process



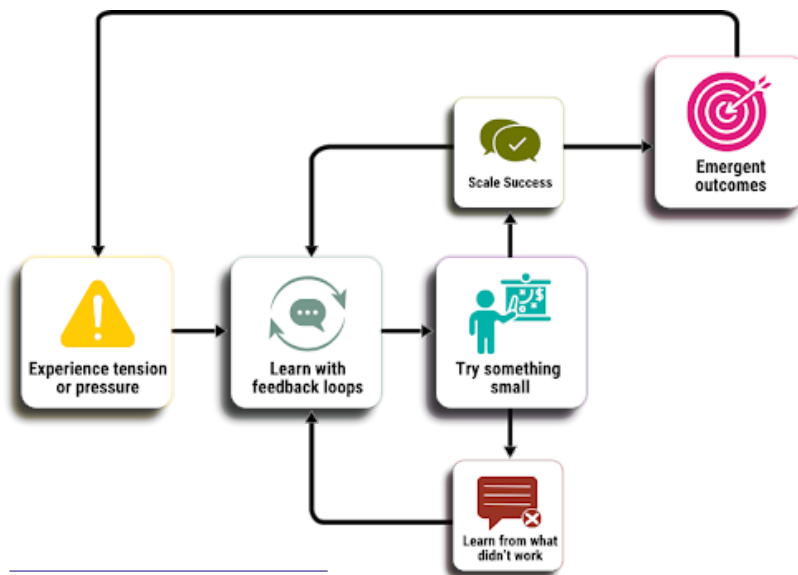


Figure 4: Adaptive Process Loop

We always make sure that the action can be quick, and they should see results pretty quickly, or know if it didn't work, because nothing is like that when you work in a big institution or a big organization. You have to get permission. You have to find funding. ... So, let's just try this small thing and see if it works, and it's like a breath of fresh air. And then people want to do it again and again, and you see people embrace it and come back with a whole bunch of ideas, because there's something extremely rewarding about being productive.

This section presents an adaptive process loop coalitions utilized to navigate uncertainty and build adaptive capacity within the coalition.

Notice and name pressures early.

Pressures can emerge within organizations (e.g., leadership turnover) or in the broader environment (e.g., large employer closing) in ways that can quickly impact the coalition. Adaptive coalitions strengthen their response by naming pressures early and treating them as signals to explore. Naming the pressure creates a shared point of attention and allows the coalition to gather targeted feedback about what is driving it and what options are available.

EXAMPLE: ENROLLMENT CHALLENGE

During grant reporting, the convening partner realizes the coalition is far from meeting its enrollment targets. Rather than assuming the cause, they surface the issue with the group as an emerging pressure and ask partners what they are noticing. The coalition then engages feedback loops to clarify what is contributing to the shortfall and where the recruitment process is getting stuck.

Clarify through feedback loops.

Once the pressure is identified, feedback loops gather additional information about what is happening and the elements driving the pressure. This is a critical step in the learning process because it engages the wisdom and experience of the collective to identify a small step forward. The step may involve using surveys or meetings to gather more information about the problem and what others have experienced and tried before. Without feedback, adaptive capacity and likelihood of success is low.

EXAMPLE: UNDERSTANDING THE ROOT CAUSE

The convening partner gathers feedback from the community-based organizations (CBOs) training providers, and program participants. After interpreting the data, they realize that the CBOs do not have the recruitment infrastructure that was assumed. To address this challenge, they call a coalition meeting to discuss recruitment capacities and identify a path forward.

Try something small.

With a stronger understanding of the context around the pressure and the factors that may be driving it, the next step is to take action in a small way. Since the process leverages past experiences where people have navigated similar challenges, the coalition can feel confident the adjustment will be a low-risk approach that produces some benefit.

EXAMPLE: TESTING A NEW APPROACH

To make targets clear, the convening partner plans to incorporate shared enrollment goals to the partnership agreements when they are up for renewal. In the short term, the group decides to separate relationship-based outreach from corrective follow-up. Community partners focus on referrals and trust-based engagement, while the training provider manages eligibility screening, appointments, and follow-up reminders.

Evaluate, learn, and share.

After trying small adjustments, the coalition needs to assess whether the change helped them move forward by identifying what worked and what didn't. Did the change reduce friction? Did it improve coordination? Did it move outcomes in the right direction? The coalition captures these insights and shares learnings with relevant stakeholders, so it carries forward into practice.

EXAMPLE: ASSESSING THE RESULTS

After piloting the revised recruitment workflow, the coalition pauses to assess what the change produced. Navigators reported that the referrals were converting smoothly into training registrations, but the overall volume of referrals remained too low to meet enrollment targets. The group decides to keep the process for referrals and shift its attention to outreach strategy.

Decide what to do next.

After assessing what the initial adjustment produced, the coalition returns to feedback to clarify what is still uncertain and what the next move should be. By sharing information across partners and gathering additional perspectives, the coalition refines its understanding of the pressure and selects a next action. This approach includes scaling what worked, adjusting the approach, or trying a different tactic altogether. This cycle repeats as coalitions learn their way forward and new pressures emerge that require attention.

EXAMPLE: SHAPING THE NEXT STEP

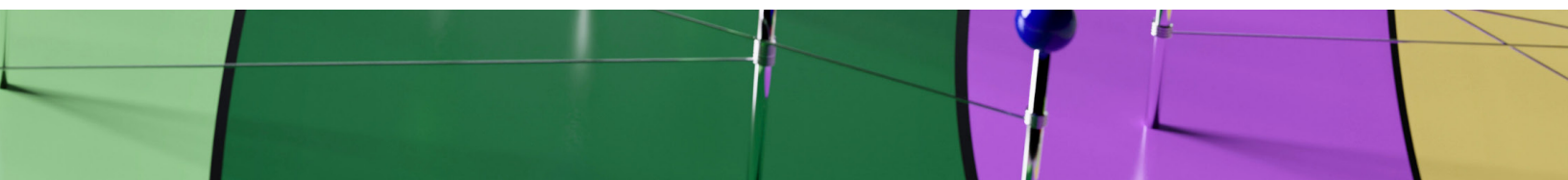
Partners hold a short co-creation session to map where their target audience already gathers, identify gaps in their current outreach channels, and decide to prioritize new sectoral events to pilot in the next recruitment cycle. They review what they learn, refine their approach, and continue iterating until enrollment stabilizes at the level needed to meet targets.

Indicators of Adaptive Capacity

Adaptive capacity is strong when coalitions leverage relational and feedback capacity to inform small program pivots that address emerging pressures. By engaging in an adaptive loop, they quickly interpret the context of the pressure and identify the best path forward with the information available. Through iteration and refinement, partners engage their adaptive capacity to make adjustments and carry their learning forward. Table 3 identifies common healthy and strained signals of adaptive capacity, names potential causes of the strain and suggests practices to build adaptive capacity over time.

Table 3 *Adaptive Capacity: Healthy vs. Strained Signals*

Healthy Signals	Strained Signals	Likely Causes	What to Try
Coalitions build comfort with ambiguity by leaning on their networks and quickly reaching people who have relevant experience. They use timely feedback to choose a next step with the information available, then adjust as they learn more.	Partners hesitate to act because they can't quickly access trusted perspectives or shared experience across the coalition. Uncertainty lingers, and momentum slows while people wait for clarity that isn't available through existing relationships or feedback channels.	- Thin cross-partner connections - Blocked feedback pathways prevent clear or timely sensemaking - Limited mechanisms for rapid feedback interpretation	Build adaptive capacity with quick wins. Work with a definable and accessible issue to practice shared protocols. Reinforce practices by publicly recognizing valuable input and sharing results of any adaptive actions.
Partners can articulate: Here's what we tried, what we learned, and how we changed our approach, and that learning carries forward.	The coalition repeats the same conversations and reinvents solutions because learning isn't captured or shared; partners struggle to name what changed, why, or what was learned.	- Learning stays within individual experiences - No consistent loop closure - Debriefs get skipped - Siloed workstreams	Maintain good process documentation and versioning that allows tracking of changes. Simple meeting protocols shared back with the group like minutes, review of prior minutes, attendance, and contributions can help preserve organization memory.
Partners can adjust tactics while staying anchored to the shared outcome (e.g., quality placements), even when timelines, capacity, or context force choices.	Adaptations drift from the shared goal and partners disagree on what success requires, leading to fragmented effort. Work continues, but it no longer clearly advances a shared outcome.	- No space to recalibrate priorities when constraints change - Pressure-driven pivots without shared sensemaking - Shared outcome not continually re-centered	Create structured meetings that include reflection on the shared mission and vision. Review any changes or adaptations within the recent period. Try comparative notetaking: collaborating organizations maintain notes from debriefs, then share notes with others to compare perspectives of things learned.
New insights (from participants, employers, frontline staff, data) can enter the system and influence direction; partners stay engaged and willing to surface constraints and propose adjustments.	Information gets filtered, delayed, or softened as it moves through hierarchy or across organizations. Partners stop raising constraints, only share concerns in side channels, or disengage when they don't see their input influencing the coalition's direction.	- Feedback loops feel one-way - Loop closure is inconsistent - Thin cross-level connections	Start sharing learnings and adaptations to programs with stakeholders during annual or bi-annual meetings. Normalize the practice to occur regularly.



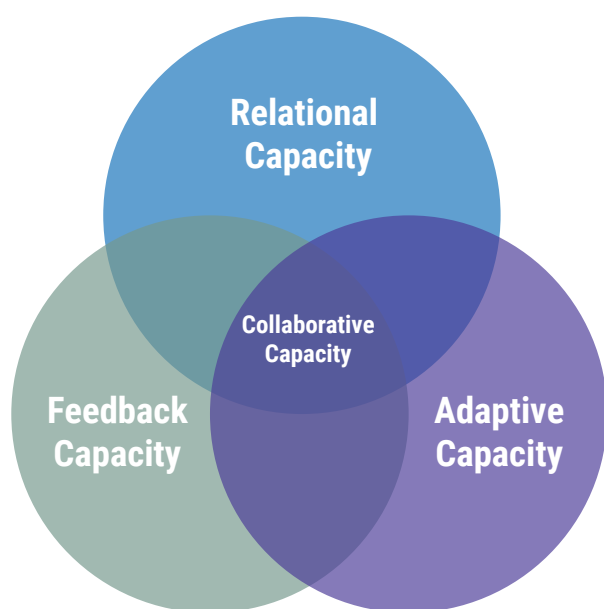
Conclusion

The purpose of this report is to provide research-informed practical guidance for cross-sector partnerships working to build pathways that lead to high-paying jobs. This work is complex and uncertain, and shifting needs and regional conditions shape what is feasible and when. Coalition leaders consistently identified three collaborative capacities that shaped their ability to achieve desired outcomes under these conditions:

- **Relational capacity** creates the conditions for coordination and trust.
- **Feedback capacity** turns distributed experience into shared understanding.
- **Adaptive capacity** converts learning into coordinated action through small tests and iteration.

While each of these capacities serves a distinct purpose, they function together as a reinforcing system as shown in Figure 5. Trust and direct connections in relational capacity strengthen feedback capacity. Feedback loops turn data into tested changes enabling adaptive capacity. Adaptive capacity leverages relationships and subsequently builds relational capacity through shared learning over time.

Figure 5: Collaborative Capacity



It is the infrastructure that enables coalitions to coordinate through trust (relational capacity), share and interpret information (feedback capacity), and pivot together when conditions change (adaptive capacity). Where relational trust and responsiveness were high, coordination mechanisms flowed; where relationships were weak, even well-designed processes became brittle. In practice, relational capacity shapes whether feedback can move across organizational boundaries and whether coalitions can act on what they learn without delay or defensiveness.

Coalition leaders described this importance as especially relevant when holding partners accountable. One coalition leader described how relationships created the conditions for feedback loops to function:

These interdependent capacities come together to form collaborative capacity, the ability to leverage the collective strengths of the group to stay connected, share what they're seeing, and make changes together in pursuit of a common outcome. It is what allows coalitions to move beyond coordination to collective performance where cross-sector partners can respond to pressures without losing momentum or trust.

The insights that follow synthesize what collaborative capacity looks like in practice. They highlight the cross-cutting patterns that emerged when partners aligned relationships, feedback, and adaptation.

Relationships are the Infrastructure for Impact

Cross-sector partnerships move at the speed of trust. Given the complex nature of building successful pathways to high-paying jobs, relational investment is not optional.

*Accountability without
relationship feels punitive.
Accountability with
relationship feels supportive.*

Conclusion

I see that with local community-based organizations and the [partners], the stronger their trust, partnership, and respect, the better the feedback loop and mechanisms are. So, being honest with partners when things aren't going well, or having hard conversations of how to change strategies ... have been built over the course of the grant.

Across collaborative work, relationships served as infrastructure that determined whether formal structures (MOUs, timelines, reporting, accountability) were functional.

Co-Created Clarity Turns Feedback into Coordinated Action

Collaborative capacity depends on coalitions using feedback as a collective interpretation practice. Engaging the collective is key, because partners may use the same words while holding different assumptions about expectations, success metrics, or what a timeline requires. Breakdowns that seem like motivation failures, can actually be shared meaning failures. Coalitions strengthen collaborative capacity when they take responsibility for interpretation: they check understanding, clarify assumptions, and make decisions visible so the partnership stays aligned.

“ I think that the relationships with the affiliates we carry are the foundation for collaboration on this program. And so, it's we as an organization investing time in listening and co-creating a shared vision, a shared language, and values for this particular program. So that's the anchor for us. If we don't have that trust. It's not going to be clear on what the goals are for this program. And that's going to translate into we're struggling to attract people to the program because we're not aligned. ”

This work sits at the intersection of all three capacities: relationships make it safe to surface confusion (relational capacity), feedback routines establish mechanisms to compare interpretations (feedback capacity), and shared clarity enables faster, more coordinated adjustments when conditions change (adaptive capacity).

One coalition leader described how trust, shared clarity, alignment, and subsequently program success were connected in their initiative.

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When coalitions co-create clarity, feedback becomes actionable: partners can identify what needs attention, agree on what the information means, and make coordinated adjustments that strengthen outcomes over time.

Flexible Boundaries

When cross-sector partnerships experience an unanticipated pressure, collaborative capacity provides enough structure to co-create clarity and follow-through, but not so much control that constricts participation or partners disengage. Coalitions with strong collaborative capacity create flexible boundaries: clear agreements about what must be consistent paired with room for variation where partners adapt how they contribute based on their role, constraints, and context.

Flexible boundaries draw on all three capacities: relational capacity sustains trust while partners negotiate constraints, feedback capacity surfaces what is and isn't working across organizations, and adaptive capacity enables coalitions to adjust course without losing alignment on shared outcomes.

For example, consistency was often of noted importance around the outcomes of the initiative. One coalition leader described a partner who primarily placed people in jobs, but the wages were not high enough.

When they came on board with our program we said, "Those aren't the jobs we're looking for. We're looking to place these people, get them training in construction, or as a community health worker, or something that's going to be higher wage." And that's a pivot for them, they had to kind of change their business model, but they have actually been thrilled, because they're like, "These people actually really have a chance now."

However, sometimes there is more flexibility when partners have different processes in place. As another coalition leader described,

I think this project has helped create a more collaborative relationship with some of the partners, the community colleges, for example, because I know that I've had many talks with them about how they do things versus how we do things, and how we can integrate and make it better and streamlined, and you got this paperwork, and I need this paperwork, how can we condense it? Sometimes our hands are tied, and it just kind of is what it is, but as long as they feel heard and, we can try to support as much as possible.

Finding balance between structure and flexibility supported speed and responsiveness while preserving ownership, trust, and commitment across the collaborative initiative.

Summary

Ultimately, the findings highlight that building pathways to high-paying jobs is not only a technical design problem. It is an implementation challenge that depends on how coalitions work together over time. Coalitions that strengthen collaborative capacity are better positioned to stay aligned, learn quickly, and adjust course as conditions change, while keeping partners engaged and accountable to shared outcomes. As future workforce investments continue to rely on cross-sector partnerships, these insights into the foundations of collaborative capacity offer a way to support program delivery and durable regional capacity that can carry the work forward beyond the original grant.

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