

From the Front Lines: Reimagining Nonprofit Job Quality

Lessons and actionable strategies from worker-led research to elevate staff voice, strengthen organizational practices, and drive lasting change.

AT A GLANCE

A paradox of the workforce development industry is that the organizations dedicated to promoting quality job pathways for jobseekers often struggle to provide their own employees with quality jobs. This report shares lessons learned and field recommendations from participatory research projects conducted by eight California workforce organizations seeking to address this challenge.

Participatory Research Approach

The primary method of research for this project was participatory research, or worker-led research, spearheaded by the Path Group team. The project team chose this approach because it ensures that solutions are shaped by those with lived experience, core to our hypothesis for this work that this approach builds trust and engagement among client-facing staff, fosters leadership development and strengthens organizations by embedding worker perspectives into decision-making. It is a collaborative research approach designed and led by people who are directly affected by or have lived experience with the research topic. This approach builds on foundations from prior worker-led research with Turning Basin Labs (TBL), Path Group, and JFF, including a new framework for assessing job quality. Two client-facing staff (“worker-researchers”) were chosen from each organization with the goal of designing and conducting participatory research on their own organizations’ job quality efforts, successes, challenges, and opportunities. The worker-researchers gathered feedback from their colleagues through structured surveys, interviews, and focus groups to identify job quality challenges and opportunities.

Who is in the cohort?


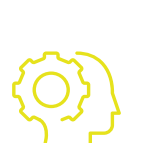





Theory of Change

Project Hypothesis:

Prioritizing job quality for client-facing staff is essential not only for worker well-being but also for organizational sustainability, ensuring nonprofits can retain talent, deliver higher quality services for jobseekers, and drive lasting change for the communities they serve.

Together, the pathways for client-facing workforce staff and the workforce development field demonstrate that improving job quality at the front lines and reinforcing it at the systems level are both essential to achieving lasting impact.

	Client-Facing Workforce Staff	Workforce Development Field
 Inputs Starting resources and commitments	Selecting trusted worker-researchers and reducing their workloads results in capacity for meaningful participation.	Leadership commitment to the project creates the foundation for feedback, learning, and culture change.
 Activities or Strategies Actions taken to drive change	Centering worker voice through participatory research , using trauma-informed practices, and fostering peer learning enables greater connection, wellness, and engagement.	Capacity building , coaching, and continuous learning strengthen leadership’s ability to receive and act on worker input.
 Short-Term Outcomes Early shifts in behavior	Workers build confidence, share feedback with leadership, and expand networks, which strengthens voice and agency .	Leadership launches job quality pilots and improves feedback loops , which begins shifting organizational culture toward shared ownership.
 Long-Term Outcomes Sustained change over time	Workers are seen as leaders , job satisfaction increases, and trust grows, which creates a healthier and more stable workforce.	Organizations establish accountability systems and embed worker voice, which supports lasting improvements in job quality .
 Intended Impact End goal	Frontline staff hold quality jobs with better wages, benefits, and agency.	Workforce organizations advance a shared, statewide vision for quality, empowered jobs across the field.

Client-Facing Workforce Staff Role

This offers a detailed outline of the activities, outcomes, and impacts that client-facing staff participated in and experienced in this project.

