



Strategy Action Labs

Take your youth opportunity strategy to the next level

A Strategy Action Lab **brings together a small group of peers to improve their strategies** through shared learning, a disciplined approach to strategy, and direct access to national data and research to increase impact. Lab participants work together over time, learning from each other and supported by a facilitator and strategy coach.

The topic:

Each SAL focuses on a specific focus area. The inaugural group focused on **Access to Good Jobs** while the second is on **Early Childhood Development**.

The benefits:

- A close group of peers to learn with, all working on similar topics
- Development for key staff who oversee strategy design and execution
- Iteration and continuous improvement in strategy development in your topic area
- A skilled facilitator, strategy coach, high-level thought leaders, and access to relevant data and research
- Opportunities to test ideas, with input from colleagues around the country
- A structure to advance learning and action, with lab participants shaping their own process
- Up to \$1,000 stipend for travel-related costs provided

The participants:

- Nominate one staff member to consistently participate for the full duration of the Lab (limited to 8 participants).
- The designated staff member can bring in other staff from their team as needed.
- Each participant brings content expertise and the ability to drive strategy in topic area for their organization.

The time commitment:

Lab participants meet in person three times per year over the course of two years (including one meeting in conjunction with CFON's Annual Forum), as well as several times virtually. Lab participants may also participate in trainings and coaching sessions outside of Lab convenings. We anticipate lab participants would dedicate approximately 8-10 hours per month to this effort.

Where did the idea for Strategy Action Labs come from?

The methodology for Strategy Action Labs was born out of a concept known as "Social Laboratories" coined by Zaid Hassan ([click here to learn more](#)). As challenges facing our society become increasingly complex and difficult to tackle for any one organization or sector, we need new approaches to collaborating and problem solving. The basic premise behind social labs is that if we have scientific-based labs for solving our most difficult scientific challenges, we should have a similar space for solving our most urgent, critical social challenges. The organizing principles behind CFON's Strategy Action Labs are the following:

1. **They are social** - they bring together diverse participants from distinct community foundations to work together and improve each other's' strategies to closing the opportunity gap over time.
2. **They are experimental** - these are not one-off pilots, but rather ongoing, sustained efforts focused on the improvement of strategy.
3. **They are systemic** - ideas and concepts developed in the labs are intended to be systemic, and deal with the whole system to address root causes, rather than just symptoms.

4. **Power off community foundation networks** - these labs allow community foundations to strengthen their own work locally, by learning from others working on similar challenges in their own communities.
5. **Action-orientated** - labs are not simply about strategy development, but also provide members a disciplined way to discover, learn, pilot and then take action together.

Social labs allow practitioners to dig into the strategy, as well as the implementation, and are inspired by other important frameworks and concepts such as community organizing, design thinking and developmental evaluation. As [Lucy Bernholz shared on the concept in Stanford Social Innovation Review](#):

“The groups that constitute each lab come together not around a project, but around a shared problem. They work through a facilitated process of discovery in which they identify points of agreement and areas of potential intervention. The process then relies on rapid experimentation and external feedback - practices that blur the line between planning and implementation in a useful way. The goal is to try things out at a scale that’s large enough to produce informative results, but not so grand that the risks of implementation become too large for stakeholders to bear.”

Experiences of Strategy Action Lab participants (focusing on Access to Good Jobs):

Dwayne Marshall, Community Foundation for Greater Chattanooga: *“The CFON Strategy Action Lab (SAL) is providing my team with the opportunity to gather insight, perspective and successful practices from a dedicated cohort of colleagues that are also developing tactics to increase access to good jobs in their communities. The SAL experience has led to invaluable relationship building with peers and thought leaders that will greatly benefit me as I continue to work in the community foundation sector.”*

Cali Brooks, Adirondack Community Foundation: *“CFON SAL takes the phrase the whole is greater than the sum of its parts to a new level. By identifying the community challenge of Access to Good Jobs and convening a cohort of community foundations working to solve that problem, SAL has ignited Adirondack Foundation's ability to effectively change outcomes for our residents.”*

Katie Merrow, New Hampshire Charitable Foundation: *“It has been invaluable getting to work closely with counterparts from other foundations on strategy, generating new ideas and practice for closing the opportunity gap. With colleagues in the lab we share ideas, coach and challenge each other, and brainstorm new ways of working to bring back to home communities – the experience far exceeds what I get from one-off conferences with a learning over time and development of long term strategic partnerships.”*

More About CFON

The Community Foundation Opportunity Network (CFON), created in early 2016, is a national leadership and action network of almost 50 community foundations working to close the opportunity gap in our communities. CFON members represent communities large and small, rural and urban, with a range of racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity.

One critical element of CFON’s work is to provide participating foundations the chance to work together to deeply assess and develop robust, scalable strategies that will make an impact in closing the gap. Research shows that organizations often create strategies that have high expectations, but typically fall short of directing meaningful impact.