

# Strengthening Worker Rights Organizations: Lessons from the LeadersTrust

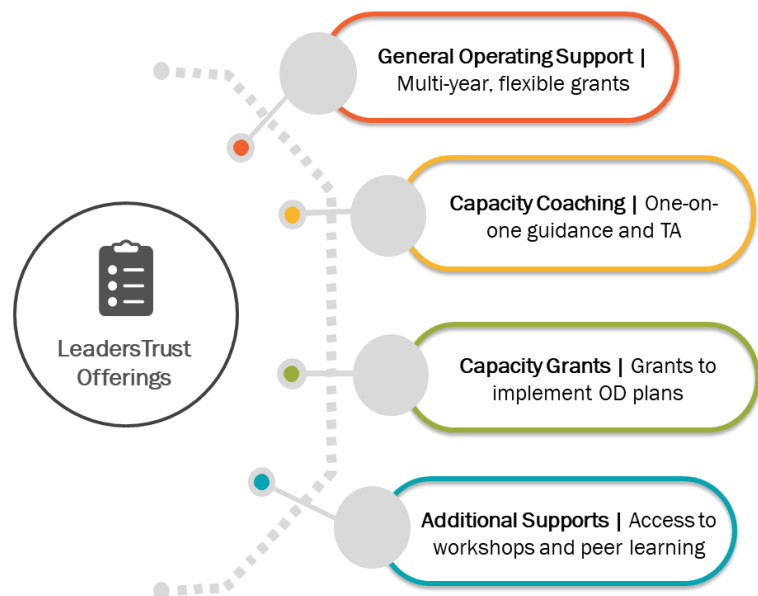
Summary Brief: August 2024

## Summary

Worker rights organizations engage in important and challenging work: from workplace organizing, to campaign and policy development, wage enforcement, and support for the various needs of workers and communities. This requires strategic thinking, staff development, resilience and empathy, among other capabilities. While money is invaluable to support this work, money alone is often not sufficient: leaders and organizations also need greater access to strategic counsel, technical assistance and other “capacity building” investments – forms of support readily available to corporations and philanthropy.

The James Irvine Foundation’s [Fair Work initiative](#) has invested more than \$20 million since 2019– as a complement to its core grantmaking – to strengthen the operations and programming of approximately 60 worker rights groups in California, through a partnership with the [LeadersTrust](#).

Irvine commissioned [Engage R+D](#) to learn about the value of these investments, and to gauge areas of strategy refinement moving forward. Our firm interviewed and conducted focus groups with more than 30 stakeholders, including organization leaders, capacity coaches, and LeadersTrust staff. We probed perspectives on the impact of these investments in total, and on specific offerings noted in the chart to the right.



### Here's what we learned:

1

**Capacity support helped organizations extend their reach.** Participating organizations were able to support more workers, by expanding their worker organizing and engagement, and deepening their reach into and across communities.

2

**Leaders and staff used support to enhance their skills.** They leveraged support to address leadership and management needs, and for staff development on technical competencies, soft skills, and field knowledge.

3

**Organizations used support to be more strategic and make management improvements.** Participating organizations used capacity support to develop and refine their strategies, strengthen organizational culture, implement various wellness practices, and improve core operations.

4

**Clarity and customization of capacity offerings are areas for improvement.** Moving forward, capacity support could be refined by improving clarity and guidance around available offerings and matching support to specific organizational needs and readiness. These refinements can help increase uptake of more underutilized supports, like peer learning and short-term responsive coaching.

*“We didn’t have...the staff to come on board and hit the ground running. [Capacity support] has allowed us to grow our team with folks who already have experience, and even spread some of our work out to other areas.”*

*- Flor Rodríguez, Executive Director, CLEAN Carwash Worker Center*

## Looking Back: Reflections on Specific Organizational Supports

Leaders interviewed shared how they used specific capacity supports available, and where they saw opportunities for refinements moving forward. We learned:



**Multi-year general operating support is seen as central to organizational growth.** Worker leaders spoke universally about the value of general operating funds, and how they leveraged those dollars:

- Strengthening core operations, such as human resources and financial management, through direct hires and use of consultants.
- Resourcing leadership development, training and technical assistance, and strategic planning.
- For smaller organizations, general operating support was often used to address key sustainability needs, including core staffing, fundraising, and—in at least one case—adding capabilities to transition to independent 501(c)(3) status.



**Capacity coaches helped leaders navigate their roles with care and expertise.** Capacity coaching was viewed as a powerful complement to general operating support.

- Coaches provided trusted advice and support to worker leaders, enhancing leaders’ ability to address organizational priorities such as strategic planning, conflict resolution, decision-making structures, and many others.
- Coaches brought expertise, empathy and humility to their work to create meaningful, responsive

learning experiences for leaders.

- Many coaches shared cultural and linguistic affinities (engaging select leaders and staff in their native language, for example), paving the way for stronger relationships and deeper levels of support.



**While hesitant on the merits of grants targeted for organizational development, most leaders came to embrace the approach.** Organizations that received capacity grants noted:

- Grant carve-outs for organizational development created time and space to ensure alignment between organizational visions and on-the-ground operations.
- As one executive director noted, *“A lot of times, you have so many programmatic costs that you often can’t think about the coaching and the consultants and the leadership support. It’s harder to prioritize it. The fact that this fund was just there meant that we used it.”*



**Most leaders did not report engaging deeply with additional workshops and peer learning offerings,** citing issues around availability of supports, a limited sense of customization and adaptation, and at times an unclear sense of what was available.

## Looking Ahead: Refinements to Capacity Building Offerings

Leaders interviewed also shared candid feedback about where LeadersTrust and Irvine might refine capacity supports in the future. Among our findings:

- **Improve clarity and guidance on offerings.** While LeadersTrust has built out a robust suite of supports to date, ensuring organizations fully understand what’s available will be important.
- **Match offerings to organizational needs and readiness.** Some leaders underutilized select offerings, while others expressed desire for additional support, in areas like coaching – signaling the value of customizing offerings to the needs of each organization.
- **Support peer learning and affinity spaces.** While existing peer learning opportunities were less utilized than other offerings, worker leaders expressed interest in new spaces to share lessons on topics such as managing leadership transitions, empowering emerging leaders, and others.

## Closing Reflections

In its 2021 report, "[Reimagining Capacity Building: Navigating Culture, Systems & Power](#)," Grantmakers for Effective Organizations highlighted the importance of evolving capacity building approaches to center racial equity and interrogate power dynamics, noting the LeadersTrust model as a best practice.

Foundation grantees, LeadersTrust coaches and staff, and Irvine team members interviewed affirmed key elements of the capacity-building model, while embracing opportunities to adjust components of the program to best meet the needs of the worker rights field. In the words of partners:

- *“That kind of tailored support provided by LeadersTrust is something that I feel is rare...You go to other trainings, you get the cookie-cutter basic best practices...I think, having more individualized support is really, really unique, and valuable.” – Lucas Zucker, Co-Executive Director, Central Coast Alliance United for a Sustainable Economy (CAUSE)*
- *“I’ve implemented multiple types of capacity building models for nonprofits. What I love about this one is the commitment to liberatory practices, relationships, and trust building. These commitments absolutely come through in the accompaniment model.” – Rosemary Linares, LeadersTrust Capacity Coach*
- *“Our ability to meet leaders where they are and forge trusted partnerships is at the root of our collective approach. We see the results of our commitment to being responsive and tailored to what leaders and their organizations are calling for, and are excited to continue to adapt with and in service of them moving forward.” – Bonnie Mazza, Project Director, The LeadersTrust*
- *“We’re committed to investments that help worker rights leaders build stronger organizations, and LeadersTrust’s offerings have played a valuable role in meeting the needs of organizations where they are. Learning efforts like this one are so valuable to helping us adapt and improve how we support the field together.” – Stephanie Brown, Senior Program Officer, The James Irvine Foundation*

#### About Engage R+D

Engage R+D partners with leading foundations, nonprofits, and public agencies throughout the U.S. to help them design, implement, measure, and improve their work. We believe that creating social change and advancing equity requires bringing together good data, stakeholder voice, and field insights in creative ways to inform strategy and drive results. We also exchange ideas and share insights with the broader field so that together we can create a more just and equitable future. [engagerd.com](http://engagerd.com)

#### About the LeadersTrust

The LeadersTrust believes that a deep investment in the leadership and organizational capacity of change makers is critical for success. By delivering responsive, long-term, high-touch investment in the people at the heart of organizations, we unlock the radical imagination and inherent power of leaders, organizations, and movements to achieve transformative change. [theleaderstrust.org](http://theleaderstrust.org)