

## A Summary Report on the Worker Council

by the TBL team

### Overview

Turning Basin Labs partnered with Jobs For The Future, May 2022 thru Feb 2023, to establish a Worker Council, consisting of ten frontline retail and manufacturing workers. The idea was that Worker Experts would collaborate with a Corporate Council comprised of seven to ten corporate leaders from JFF's Corporate Leadership network. The goal was to explore new practices and policies that could provide workers more agency and voice in the workplace. JFF's goals were to "investigate and design pilots that explore and test promising Worker Voice initiatives." TBL's primary mission was to source Worker Experts and co-design, launch, and support the Worker Council.

### Recruitment

The Worker Council recruitment process was an exciting and very useful undertaking for Turning Basin Labs. More than 80 individuals of diverse backgrounds from across the country applied for the Worker Council. The job posting reached a large audience due to a targeted effort at various labor groups and allies within the TBL/JFF network. The interview process was competitive and engaging. One panel interviewer from JFF reported that "we got more from people in 20 minutes than I have gotten in 90 minutes in other interviews." In collaboration with JFF, TBL ended up making offers to ten individuals who proved to be excellent national worker representatives. Team members were deeply engaged from the start to finish, giving feedback on what worked, what were the challenges, and surprises.

### Resources and Supports

One of TBL's main responsibilities over the course of the project was providing resources and support to the Worker Experts (WEs). We achieved this with regular individual check-ins and training on both soft skills and technical skills. These one-on-one check-ins were instrumental in maintaining Worker Experts' comfort with the project as well as provided a space for identifying ways for Worker Council members to remain engaged.

TBL arranged two sessions with the WEs and subject-matter experts Tom Kochan and Joel Gershenfeld. These sessions provided a deep dive into how to frame conversations with employers. The sessions also injected some energy as the lessons provided by Tom and Joel will serve the Worker Experts in future engagements with their employers. As one Worker Expert reflected, "Our time with Tom and Joel was excellent. Their expertise and knowledge really brought clarity to this type of work. I really felt like they listened to us."

With the Worker Council being an entirely remote undertaking, it was important that the Worker Council had technological proficiency to do the work. TBL helped the WEs gain technical skills in Zoom, Google Suite, and Slack. Some WEs had more expertise in these skills than others, and we conducted individual sessions with those who needed additional support. Significantly, holding all the Worker Council sessions on Zoom allowed for the WEs to become competent users of virtual meeting resources as well as improving their meeting facilitation and note taking skills.

Worker Experts gained confidence in advocating for their issues and in public speaking through regular TBL coaching and instruction. Three of them shared personal stories during the Discovery Interviews (the Council's culminating event) of how they had been personally affected by the issues at hand. They also adeptly facilitated each of the three Discovery Interview conversations. Reflecting on what they had gained from the project, one Worker Expert said that "I found my voice. My experiences matter," and another said that "this was one of the first repeat meeting spaces where I *did* feel comfortable to speak."

## Discovery Interviews

The Discovery Interviews were the culminating event of the Worker Council. The Worker Experts decided on three main topics to discuss with corporate leaders: Compensation, Power Dynamics, and Communication. JFF was able to bring four corporate leaders together for the event.

The WEs were divided into three groups based on their interest in the topics. Each group met on their own to come up with specific discussions and questions they wanted to address in the Discovery Interviews. An individual was selected for each group who would share a story of how they have been personally affected, in order to better frame the issues for the corporate leaders.

The WEs even organized a document for each of them to share a photo and personal bios, to equip corporate leaders with information so they could better engage. After nine months of working together, this was their opportunity to voice their thoughts and concerns to someone who might be in a position of power to change things. There was excitement about simply being heard. As one said, "I've learned that I do have a breadth and depth of experience that is meaningful just by way of sharing it."

Some learnings that came out of the Discovery Interviews included:

- The importance of networking and mentorship as key supports for frontline workers – having someone for workers to rely on who is not their manager.
- Feedback loops – whenever there is a decision to be made or initiative to be planned, involving worker feedback before, during, and after.

- Importance for employers to consider the full picture of a worker's life, from transportation to housing, food security, mental health, and career navigation.
  - For example, when proposing a new store location, considering how accessible it is to people as far as transportation.
- Importance of knowing people outside of the team one is working on.
  - Having mentors who are higher up in the organization would encourage employees and workers to want to stay and climb the ladder, which would increase retention and morale.
- A need to improve how corporations are doing real-time feedback.
  - They have evaluations and reviews, but they need to find ways to get employees and managers together to provide feedback.
- Importance of spending time with workers to create trust
- Decentralized spaces – what happens when you have multiple stores, and how do corporations create a unique experience while having consistency?

An intersectional issue that all three teams touched on was how corporations might be open to finding out what services workers need and letting workers know about services that are available. Workers often do not know what resources their employer is offering or why they are valuable. Corporate leaders did agree that they must be creative in finding ways of reaching their workers in order to be more effective in joining workers with services provided.

One corporate leader shared that printing has been a great resource; posting printed materials relating to housing, mental health, and other support has been effective in reaching workers. Another shared learning is that they have been using digital tools more creatively to share resources, specifically investing in tools such as mobile applications to capitalize on workers' phones. Corporate leaders and WEs also discussed best practices to ensure workers are being invested in while they are on the clock, as opposed to requiring that workers access resources in their free time. Putting a face behind the resources, by placing staff in break rooms or other common areas, can be helpful for workers. This could help with filtering and applying information as relevant to individuals or groups of people in specific work assignments. One Worker Expert proposed the idea of a regional "Well-Being Coach" – someone who rotates around stores to get an understanding of local needs and feelings.

The WEs prepared for weeks for the Discover Interviews. Although it was a small group, corporate leaders showed up ready to listen and share insights. A Worker Expert said: "My biggest takeaway is encouragement that there are people interested in having these conversations, from both sides of the spectrum. That it can be done thoughtfully and with good intent, and that hopefully it can be heard with good intent. It was really encouraging to hear corporate leaders share stories about seeing the value in seeking solutions from front-line workers."

## Conclusion

This project formed connections and solidarity amongst the WEs. One Worker Expert described finding “so many similarities in our experiences despite our differences in age, culture, and backgrounds”. The unexpected connections among the group allowed for them to weather the challenges of the project, and they will last long beyond this project.

TBL and JFF believe that engaging employers who desire to engage with workers as partners can lead to a beneficial outcome for all. The Discovery Interviews showed that it is possible to create an environment focused on worker voice if we engage employers whose perspective is supportive of regularly partnering with WEs.

Recruiting corporate leaders was a challenge we did not foresee. We learned that these partnerships must be planned and developed prior to the project itself. This was an opportunity where JFF and TBL came together to resolve the issue at hand, looking at the bigger picture and finding a suitable solution through networking.

JFF and TBL, in the Worker Council model, believe that there are corporations looking to engage their workers authentically as partners. That partnership has the potential to create a stronger and more effective future outcome for not only workers but corporations as well. Projects like the Worker Council can effect change within corporate practices and policies.