Collaborative Improvement Foundations

PRACTICE JOURNAL

Introduction

What is Collaborative Improvement Foundations?

Collaborative Improvement Foundations is a 5-part comprehensive course that focuses on application, preparing you with the practices you need to begin developing and implementing strategies for systems change.

Introduction to Collaborative Improvement: The Essentials is a 3-part mini-course that builds basic awareness and understanding of core collaborative improvement techniques, can be taken as a prerequisite to Collaborative Improvement Foundations, or, in some cases, in its place.

Collaborative Improvement Foundations will introduce you to all eight steps in the Collaborative Improvement process in detail. You will also receive support and guidance to complete steps two through five in your own work, and end the course prepared to begin testing changes in step six.

This course is part of a sequence that starts with Introduction to *Collaborative Improvement: The Essentials*, and continues through *Strategies for Systems Change* and *Implementing Strategies.*

Strategies for Systems Change is a mini-course that will more thoroughly support participants to apply steps four and five to their current work to analyze factors and develop a suite of priority strategies they will test and refine over time.

Implementing Strategies covers the practical application of steps six, seven, and eight.

What is StriveTogether's Collaborative Improvement Methodology?

Based on the experience of Cradle to Career network Members we have created a methodology that combines a structured continuous improvement process with Results Count™ equity and design thinking approaches This unique approach allows partnerships to use continuous improvement practices collaboratively and at the systems level.

We often say simply that "collaborative improvement is continuous at scale." What does that mean?

1. **Systems-level** - this relates to the "at scale" part. Continuous improvement is what occurs at the organizational level. But when we're working on changing systems to improve outcomes, it requires collaborating with multiple partners which is what collaborative improvement is designed for.

2. **Focus on rapid learning** - instead of implementing changes and waiting to see if they shift results, collaborative improvement focuses on continuous learning through action. Performing small tests and working with "good enough" data to quickly determine what levers to pull to shift outcomes and close gaps.

2. **Cross-sector** - this is the collaboration part of collaborative improvement. Part of the distinction from continuous improvement is that collaborative improvement will involve partners from at least two sectors seeking systemic solutions to persistent problems impacting outcomes in their community.

Across the country, communities are working to build better systems, ones that create opportunities for every child and family. They're looking for reliable, tested ways to break down silos, build trust across sectors, and align around goals that are shared by the whole community, from grassroots to grasstips.

The Collaborative Improvement process is the StriveTogether network's answer to that need.

In Collaborative Improvement Foundations, you'll follow a real-world-inspired case study, meet characters navigating this work in a community like yours, and apply each step to your own context.

Along the way, you'll explore tools, frameworks, and examples that will help you lead, support, or participate in collaborative improvement with clarity and confidence.

Course Sequence and Links

Part 1

Improving Outcomes through Collaborative Improvement

Part 2

Naming and Clarifying Your Outcomes

Part 3

Seeing and Shifting the System

Part 4

Designing Strategies for Change

Part 5

Testing, Monitoring, and Scaling

Resource Database

Google Sheets - Online Resource

Part 1

Improving Outcomes Through Collaborative Improvement

Partnership Roles Reflection

Reflect on the role that your backbone plays. Reflect on the role that your partners play. What are some opportunities to strengthen the roles that you contribute to in your partnership?

Examples of roles that backbones and partners play are provided on the next page.

Improving Outcomes Through Collaborative Improvement

Common Roles Partners Can Play	Common Roles Backbones Can Play
• **Storyteller:** Provides experiences and anecdotes that support and shape the direction of the network's systems work.	• **Communicator & Amplifier:** Communicates publicly and with partners about progress towards systems change, including wins and challenges.
• **Will Builder:** Use connections with key populations to build authentic and trusting relations so that the network's work is successful.	• **Relationship Connector:** Connect people and organizations to each other to advance systems change work.
• **Content Area Expert:** Use their experience with the particular outcome or focus area to advance the work of the network.	• **Facilitator:** Guide and support partners to ensure that systems are changed to improve conditions for individuals of color.
• **Community Insight:** Use their experience either working with or as a member of the community to advance the work of the network.	• **Policy Advocacy:** Identify policy problems and elevate community-informed priorities, to advance policy changes that improve outcomes.
• **Data Provider:** Share qualitative and quantitative data to support data-driven decision making.	• **Data Manager:** Collects data from partners and provides data access that supports networks to utilize the data in their work.
• **Collaborator:** Work with other network members to identify and implement systems-focused solutions in your community.	• **Convener:** Bring people and organizations together to change systems.

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Reflection: Collaborative Improvement Steps

Reflect on the eight steps of the Collaborative Improvement cycle. Where can your own work use a refresh? Are you experiencing anything like the scenarios you just read in the e-learning?

Review the eight steps and their key questions over the next two pages.

Return to the E-Learning

Improving Outcomes Through Collaborative Improvement

1 **Identify the Problem and Intended Results:** State the problem and the change the community would like to achieve at the outcome level.

Key Questions to Consider:
- What's the overall result you want?
- How will you know a change occurred?

2 **Understand the current conditions:** Learn what the data is telling you, pinpoint existing disparity gaps and identify partners engaged in the work.

Key Questions to Consider:
- What is your whole population?
- What disparities currently exist?
- What do the children/parents/teachers/program providers think about the problem?
- What partners are engaged in the work?

3 **Develop targets:** Set the focus and goal of your work.

Key Questions to Consider:
- What demographic population is your target focused on improving the outcome for?
- How is your target aimed at reducing/eliminating a disparity?

4 **Analyze system factors:** Understand the structures, relationships, and ideas that helps produce or influence the current situation.

Key Questions to Consider:
- What factors, if changed, would create progress towards your targets?
- Which factors specifically impact your focus population?
- What stakeholders have you engaged in order to know that these are the factors that are impacting your focus population?

5 **Identify systems strategies:** Develop targeted and universal strategies for making an improvement.

Key Questions to Consider:
- What partners do you need to engage to complete the intervention(s)?
- Which of your interventions are universal?
- Which are targeted?
- How will you engage stakeholders in developing these interventions?

Improving Outcomes through Collaborative Improvement

6 **Test strategies:** Perform PDSA cycles to identify best practices and strategies that are **most successful at impacting the target.**

Key Questions to Consider:
- What data will show a change has occurred?
- Who do you need to engage to ensure your intervention(s) reach your target population?
- What feedback from stakeholders could help improve the intervention(s)?

7 **Monitor and Improve:** Continue to monitor data and make improvements to interventions until they are ready to scale.

Key Questions to Consider:
- How are you tracking your work in order to know an improvement is being made? How frequently?
- Are your interventions impacting the target population you have selected?
- How do you know disparity gaps are closing?

8 **Scale and Spread:** Know what interventions to spread and implement a plan for successful scale and spread.

Key Questions to Consider:
- What effective practices emerged specific to your target population?
- What is your plan for scaling and spreading effective practices? How will you communicate this to the community?
- Who do you need to engage in order to scale your work?

Reflection: Learning Goals

What are you hoping to get out of this learning experience? Respond to one or more of the following:

- What question or challenge brought you to this learning experience?
- How are you hoping this learning experience will support the work you're doing right now?
- After this learning experience, what are you hoping will be different?

Return to the E-Learning

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Live Session Notes

Part 2

Naming and Clarifying Your Outcomes

Naming and Clarifying Your Outcomes

Reflection: Laying the Foundation

The first three steps of collaborative improvement work together to answer the question:

"What do we want to accomplish together? What is our North Star?"

Identify the Problem and Intended Results

Understand the current conditions

Develop Targets

Review what you've learned so far and consider your own experience with collaborative improvement work. Where is your group right now, and what might you need to establish to fully answer this question?

Return to the E-Learning

Naming and Clarifying Your Outcomes

Complete the three steps in the self-diagnostic before your next live event.

✓ Independent Practice

Self-Diagnostic: What is our North Star? What do we want to accomplish together?

1 Select any of the phrases that describe the status of your collaborative work right now.

- ☐ A. When decisions come up, it's hard to tell which option best serves the shared goal
- ☐ B. When partners explain the work, they emphasize different outcomes as the goal.
- ☐ C. Conversations keep drifting toward solutions before we're aligned on the problem.
- ☐ D. We've made some progress, but it's slower than expected and we're not sure why.
- ☐ E. We know inequities exist, but we don't have a clear way to see whether gaps are closing.
- ☐ F. Data gets shared, but it's hard to tell what it means for decision-making.
- ☐ G. We're unsure which group of people should be the main focus of our work.
- ☐ H. We've named goals, but they feel too broad or too vague to guide action.
- ☐ I. When strategic actions are proposed, follow-through looks uneven across partners.

2 Next, use the guidance below to determine what some helpful next steps might be.

If you selected any of statements A, B, and C:

You may want to revisit **Step 1: Identify the Problem and Intended Result.** This step helps groups get oriented around a shared "why" and "for whom," so learning and decisions stay anchored to a common result.

Consider the questions:

- What outcomes will you improve in your community? And for whom?
- What is the overall result your community would like to see?
- How will you be able to tell that a change has occurred?

Try these approaches:

- Uncover and clarify key outcomes that have been prioritized by the partnership. Begin to think about what it would mean to positively impact these outcomes.
- Examine aggregated and disaggregated community-level outcome data and look for patterns and disparities. Discuss these with partners and key stakeholders.

Naming and Clarifying Your Outcomes

If you selected any of statements D, E, and F:

You may want to focus on **Step 2: Understand Current Conditions.** This step supports deeper learning from data — especially disaggregated data — to understand how outcomes differ across populations and where barriers are most pronounced.

Consider the questions:

- What disparities currently exist?
- What is your whole, program, and focus population? How did the group decide?
- What do the people closest to the result think about the problem?
- What partners are currently engaged in the work?

Try these approaches::

- Take a closer look at existing data such as: Outcome and key indicator data, Whole population data, Aggregated and disaggregated 5-year trend data, Bright spot data
- Consider qualitative information including: insights from stakeholder interviews, other questionnaires or surveys, or empathetic interviews
- Complete or review your results at the center chart to identify partners engaged and needed
- Complete a process map to understand the steps and outputs of a strategy or process and determine where there are opportunities for change

If you selected any of statements G, H, I:

You may want to work on **Step 3: Develop Targets.** This step helps groups translate learning into a clear, measurable focus so improvement efforts are intentional, aligned, and testable.

Consider the questions:

- What is your global, or whole-group, target? What targets do you have for your program and/or focus population?
- Is your target focused on improving the outcome for a demographic population or aimed at reducing/eliminating a disparity?

Try these approaches:

- Use an "egg chart" to map your whole, program, and focus populations.
- Use aggregated and disaggregated data to set targets for whole and focus populations.
- Use the SMARTIE framework to set targets that are specific, measurable, ambitious/achievable, relevant, time-bound, and equity-focused.

Naming and Clarifying Your Outcomes

3 Finally, make a Plan of Action by selecting resources or worksheets to explore, writing down questions to raise in your live event, and plotting action items to advance your real-world work.

A. Open the Collaborative Improvement Foundations [Resource Database](#) and identify tools that you can use to complete the steps on the previous pages.

☐ **I've completed this.**

B. Write down any questions you want to bring to the coaches or peers in the next live event:

C. Complete at least one row of the action plan below:

	Who…	Will do what…	By when…
1			
2			
3			
4			
5			

Live Session Notes

Part 3

Seeing and Shifting the System

Complete the three steps in the self-diagnostic before your next live event.

Practice: Factor Identification

1 **Self-Diagnostic: Analyze System Factors**

Select each statement that describes your experience, then read the guidance that accompanies your choices. Use this information to complete a Plan of Action.

- [ ] A. The group jumps quickly into talking about systems and root causes, but shies away from conversations that clearly describe the specific outcome or disparity people are experiencing.

- [ ] B. Conversations center on direct interventions and programmatic solutions rather than examining the behavior patterns, system structures, and mental models that create and reinforce the problem.

- [ ] C. The group easily names harmful beliefs held by others, but rarely reflects on biases or assumptions influencing their own thinking, actions, and decisions.

- [ ] D. Factors are identified primarily by backbone staff, leaders, people with institutional power, or other folks farther from the result, without input from people who experience the outcome firsthand, such as youth, families, or community members.

- [ ] E. After identifying factors, the group moves quickly to action without checking them against lived experience and available data.

- [ ] F. The group can not agree on what strategies are most likely to be effective, or agree on a course of action.

2 Next, read the guidance that corresponds to what you picked.

If you selected A:

It can be very tempting to focus on what is "under the surface" once we understand that events are just the "tip of the iceberg." However, those visible effects of the system are the rallying cry for collective action and will be the way you can tell if your beneath-the-surface work is having an impact.

> **Try this:** Work together to clearly name the event or outcome you are seeing, using data where possible. Being precise about *what* is happening creates a shared anchor for the deeper analysis that follows.

If you selected B:

When we notice a problem, it is natural to want to try to fix it directly. This is important, and often life-saving work, however, without addressing the systemic conditions that create and underpin the problem, you are 'treating symptoms' without addressing the 'illness.'

> **Try this:** Use the full systems iceberg to explore behaviors, system structures, and mental models—not just outcomes—so the work focuses on changing conditions, not fixing people. Try to unearth any mental models that keep the group focused on surface-level solutions, and collaborate on ways to shift thinking internally.

If you selected C:

Sometimes we can default to "mental models are out there, not in here" thinking. Without examining our own beliefs, biases, and assumptions, we run the risk of reinforcing the status quo.

> **Try this:** Practice surfacing and intentionally examining the mental models operating within individuals in the group. Modeling this behavior yourself can be a great start to normalizing this practice in the group's work.

If you selected D:

In an effort to move quickly or efficiently, it can be easy to hop from step to step without pausing to get input from those most affected by the disparities you're working to dismantle. Unfortunately, this can lead to blind spots that mean missed opportunities for your collective impact work.

> **Try this:** Engage stakeholders closest to the result in identifying and sense-making around factors. Build community voice into processes, workflows, meetings, and everyday conversations. Build relationships with trusted community advisors and check in regularly.

If you selected E:

After determining what is standing in the way of equity, most groups are eager to start dismantling the barriers they've named. However, if you act without validating systems factors, you may end up spending resources on problems that are not root causes or not important to the people impacted by the work.

> **Try this:** Pause to validate factors with data and with those closest to the result before developing strategies. Validation helps ensure the work is focused on what truly matters and prevents wasted effort, lost time, and missed opportunities.

If you selected F:

A thorough factor analysis will uncover many more factors than you can address in one collaborative improvement cycle. Before moving on to strategies, the group should narrow the list to help intentionally make decisions and agree on strategic actions.

> **Try this:** Use a tool like the factor prioritization four-blocker to lead a conversation that narrows the scope of your work to the factors that the group has authority and capacity to influence, and that are most likely to shift conditions and help meet your SMARTIE and global targets.

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3 Make a Plan of Action by selecting resources or worksheets to explore, writing down questions to raise in your live event, and plotting action items to advance your real-world work.

A. Open the Collaborative Improvement Foundations Resource Database and identify tools that you can use to execute the suggestions provided on the previous pages.

☐ **I've completed this.**

B. Write down any questions you want to bring to the coaches or peers in the next live event:

C. Complete at least one row of the action plan below:

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1			
2			
3			
4			
5			

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Part 4

Designing Strategies for Change

Designing Strategies for Change

Complete the self-diagnostic and Plan of Action before your next live event.

✓ Practice: Identify Systems Strategies

1 **Self-Diagnostic: Analyze System Factors**

Select each statement that describes your experience, then read the guidance that accompanies your choices. Use this information to complete a Plan of Action.

☐ A. Strategies drift away from the prioritized factors the group spent time validating, or it's unclear which factor a strategy is meant to address.

☐ B. Strategies ideas mostly center around adding new programs, services, interventions, or activities without changing behavior patterns, system structures, or mental models.

☐ C. The group focuses on improving conditions for 'everyone,' and seems uncomfortable or reluctant to tailor strategies for a specific demographic or focus population.

☐ D. The group spends a lot of time debating different aspects of their strategies before moving forward, leading to stalled action and lost momentum.

☐ E. Strategy ideas stay siloed within individual organizations or sectors, rather than reinforcing one another across the system.

2 Next, read the guidance that corresponds to what you picked.

If you selected A:

Groups relatively new to collaborative improvement may eagerly "take off" when strategy development comes up, unintentionally disregarding the important factor identification, analysis and validation work done in previous steps. Effective strategies directly address at least one priority factor.

> **Try this:** Before strategy discussions, 'set the container' by naming the result, key indicator, outcome, and priority factors to be sure everyone is grounded in the same context. Use strategy hypothesis templates to help the group analyze if the strategy addresses priority factors and intended outcomes.

If you selected B:

Direct interventions are often necessary and important, but on their own they rarely shift outcomes at scale. Without system-level strategies, progress is slow and disparities persist.

> **Try this:** Ask "what would need to change about how the system operates for this strategy to be successful long-term?" Look for opportunities to adjust policies, practices, roles, or decision rules. Align strategies to factors at deeper levels of the systems iceberg. Learn about system levers and choose some to be the focus of your strategic work.

If you selected C:

Universal strategies can improve conditions broadly, but targeted strategies are often necessary to disrupt disparities and accelerate progress for those facing the greatest barriers.

> **Try this:** Learn more about the concept of targeted universalism and how targeted strategies and actions can lead to improvements in population-level outcomes. Label each strategy as universal or targeted (or both) and check whether your overall mix supports equity as well as scale.

If you selected D:

Collaborative Improvement relies on learning through action. Treating strategies as hypotheses allows the group to test, learn, and adapt quickly.

> **Try this:** Frame strategies as tests of change rather than permanent solutions. Ask: What could we try in the next 60–90 days to learn whether this works?

If you selected E:

One of the most difficult shifts in collaborative improvement can be that from "my program" thinking to shared ownership of conditions and outcomes. When strategies remain siloed, they may be well-intentioned but fail to create the reinforcing system changes needed to shift results.

> **Try this:** Ask how strategies across sectors could align, sequence, or complement one another to change conditions together. Look for opportunities where one partner's action enables or strengthens another's, and name roles and relationships explicitly.

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Designing Strategies for Change

3 Make a Plan of Action by selecting resources or worksheets to explore, writing down questions to raise in your live event, and plotting action items to advance your real-world work.

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 ☐ **I've completed this.**

B. Write down any questions you want to bring to the coaches or peers in the next live event:

C. Complete at least one row of the action plan below:

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1			
2			
3			
4			
5			

Live Session Notes

Part 5

Testing, Monitoring, and Scaling

Plan Your Mini-PDSA

Follow the steps to plan and carry out your mini-PDSA cycle before your final live event.

If you can not complete this work by then, be sure to at least get started!

Remember, your mini-PDSA is for practice. It should be a small change within your sphere of influence that you can test in the next few days to a week.

PLAN

Who:	
What:	
When:	
Data to collect:	
Prediction:	

DO

Did your test go as planned? What did you observe? Also record any numerical data you collected.

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STUDY

Did things go according to plan? If not, why? Plot or graph your data if possible. What did you learn? What will you do differently next time as a result?

ACT

Will you adopt, adapt, or abandon this change? Why? What will your next step or test look like and when will it start?

Additional resources (these are also available in the Collaborative Improvement Foundations resource database):

Strive Together PDSA Cycles Toolkit

PDSA Ramp Tool.

Live Session Notes

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