



BRIDGE
HOUSTON

THE BRIDGE HOUSTON FORUM

Mobilizing Houston: What We Learned, What's Next



As a trusted convener with nearly 45 years of experience bringing together leaders across sectors, identities, and ideologies ALF seeks to build the connections that fuel collaborative action. We know the data, we understand the problem, and we believe our community is ready to imagine what is possible when we turn our collective insights into coordinated action, together.



Nory Angel

President, American Leadership Forum - Houston/Gulf Coast

TRUST AS INFRASTRUCTURE

Houston has no shortage of extraordinary leaders.

What we are lacking is a space where those leaders can find each other, build trust, and move from connection to coordinated action. On Monday, April 13th and Monday, April 20th the American Leadership Forum (ALF) convened key stakeholders and community leaders across sectors. Everyone in the room was deeply committed to the work of realizing better systems in education, workforce, and economic mobility for a thriving Houston. ALF's express goal was to build trust among these leaders and foster connections rooted in shared values, enabling them to imagine what progress could look like for our region.

Since its inception in 1982, the American Leadership Forum has been committed to cultivating collaborative leadership across Houston's diverse communities. Through structured dialogue and experiential learning, leaders deepen their capacity to engage

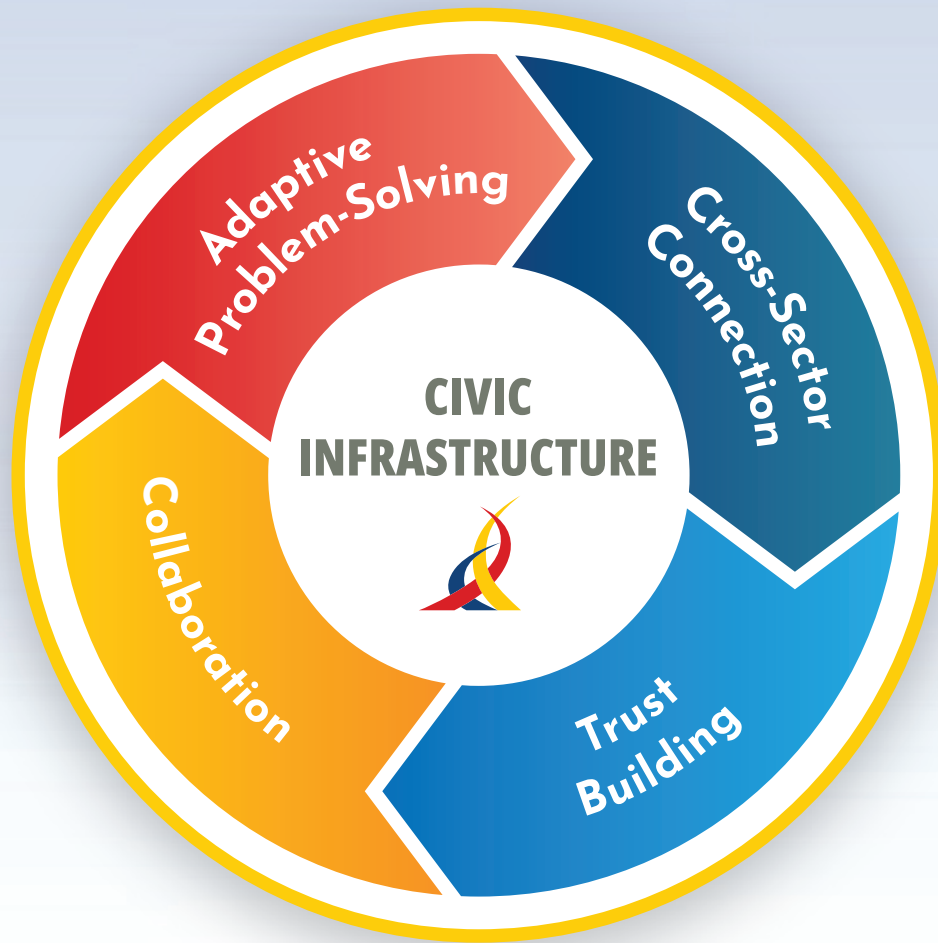
constructively across differences, enhancing their ability to lead adaptively and collaboratively. At the heart of this work is relationship building and trust as a vehicle for achieving collaborative leadership outcomes.

A wide body of research confirms that trust reduces barriers to cooperation, lowers transaction costs, and increases resilience in collaborative systems. Relational trust enables stakeholders to invest more fully in collective problem-solving and leadership, especially in high-stakes or uncertain environments. Strong interpersonal ties, mutual respect, and open communication are repeatedly identified as the relational foundation for effective collaboration.

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“Many of us have the same needs with limited resources. There is power in collaboration.”

- Bridge Practitioner



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“It gave me more hope in humanity that I was able to meet likeminded leaders who seem to genuinely care about one another’s hurdles.”

- Bridge Practitioner

PROGRESS MOVES AT THE RATE OF TRUST

As part of ALF's One Community Strategic Plan, Bridge Houston was launched in Fall 2025 to explore how the ALF network could move from dialogue to action on shared regional priorities. Grounded in years of network activation, the initiative was designed to connect Senior Fellows and community partners around the top three issues identified by the Senior Fellow network:



**Education
Access**



**Workforce
Development**

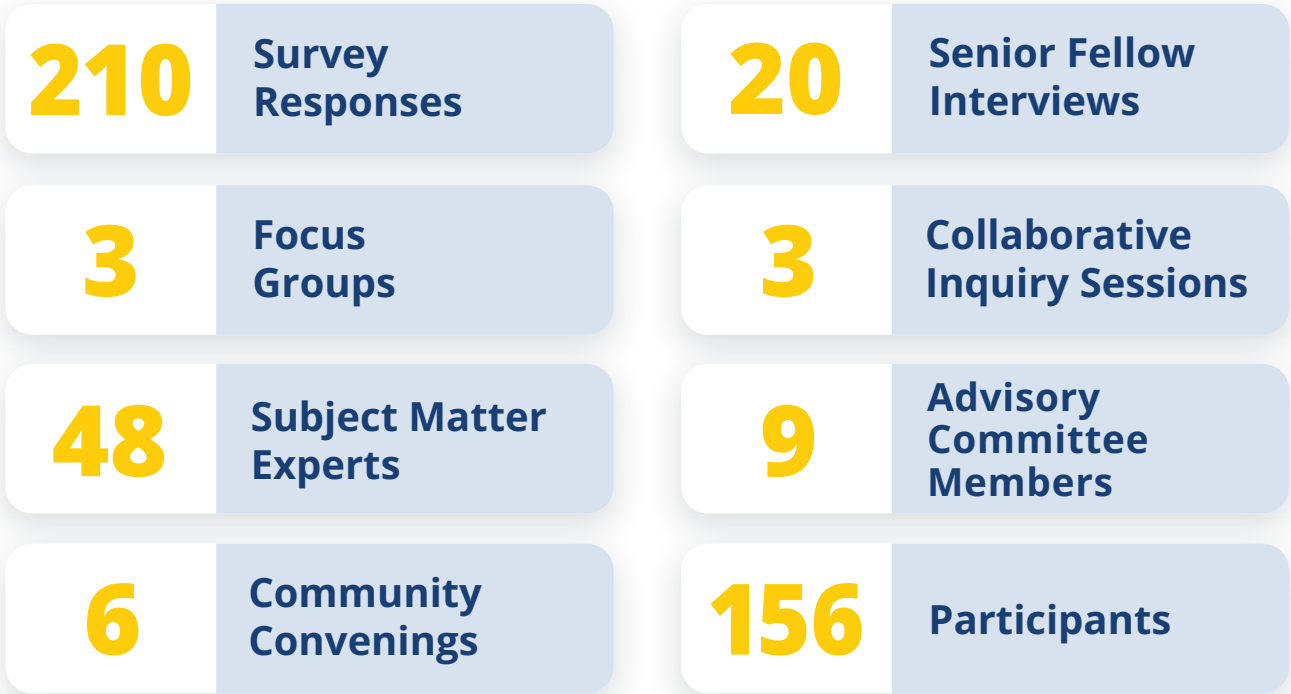


**Economic
Mobility**

The work has centered on deepening trust-based relationships, identifying areas of alignment, and building the infrastructure for long-term collaboration.

The design of the program reflects the belief that leadership must be practiced collectively, not held individually. Dense, well-connected networks, marked by mutual accountability and aligned values, are better equipped to respond to complex community challenges. By embedding structures for peer learning, collective decision-making, and distributed initiative throughout each program phase, Bridge Houston aims to activate social capital and foster a more interconnected and collaborative leadership culture across the region.

Bridge Houston Phase I began with a network-wide survey and listening sessions to identify priorities and surface emerging collaborations already underway in our network. Programming was co-designed with input from 9 advisory members and 48 subject-matter experts.



The goal of Phase I programming was to coalesce system components and build momentum on each issue through broad stakeholder convening and engagement. What we quickly learned through convening was that the programmatic priorities do not represent three distinct issues, but a continuum of systems that our communities navigate.

WHAT THE FORUM REVEALED: THE RIGHT ROOM

Stakeholders from each issue area, across the Houston and Gulf Coast Region and across sectors were invited for two days of connection, learning, and imagination. Hosted at the Ismaili Center on Allen Parkway, a space for community building, dialogue, and connection, Bridge Houston Practitioners came into a space whose design is deeply aligned with our convening goals.

Over the course of two days Bridge Houston Practitioners:

- Co-created space to stay curious, show up with authenticity, build bridges, and take risks together
- Challenged themselves to stretch their understanding of complex problems and the people, beliefs, behaviors and relationships that are necessary to mobilize together towards coordinated action
- Deepened their commitment to leadership as a practice meant to create the conditions for others to bring their unique perspectives and experiences to the table
- Acknowledged that people don't resist change so much as they resist loss, and getting curious about what people stand to lose is more useful than pushing harder
- Learned from their peers about the latest research, best practices, and perspective shifts required to unlock progress



"Progress begins with relationships." ”

- Bridge Practitioner

Bridge Practitioners showed up Day 1 ready to dive in, and the course of the Forum built relationships that expanded their sense of what was possible.

75% of Bridge Practitioners

entered the Forum at a 'ready' or 'highly ready' level to engage in coordinated action... with an average readiness score of 4.06 out of 5.

73% of post-Forum survey respondents

said they believed the relationships formed or strengthened through the convening could translate into coordinated action to a great or very great extent.

88% of survey respondents

said they were more likely to initiate or participate in collaborative action in the next 90 days, with 59% selecting 'much more likely.'



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“I liken it to preparing the field. The convening provided rich soil, plenty of water, and all the seeds, now we have to go plant and tend the crops. The heartening thing was how many other farmers are right there with us.”

- Bridge Practitioner



WHAT WE ARE LEARNING

What became clear across both days is that the leaders in the room were operating in remarkable proximity to one another, working on interconnected challenges, and often doing so without the relationships that would make their work stronger. On day 2, we began by asking “were you able to use the week between session to connect with another Practioner?” Nearly every hand in the room went up.



The design of the program has been an emergent process, drawing on ALF best practices, testing assumptions, and experimenting boldly. We have been operating under the assumption that cultivating trust takes multiple touchpoints over an extended period of time. We learned that intentional design, curation of stakeholders, and an invitation into a collaborative space can accelerate that process. Trust-building is scalable.

Two days, with a wealth of perspectives in the room and a structured process for honest conversation proved to be a catalyst to shift how leaders saw each other and what they believed was possible together.



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“I’m impressed at how quickly we trusted each other in such a short amount of time.”

- Bridge Practitioner

WHERE WE'RE GOING

The Bridge Houston program represents ALF stepping fully into its mission, to “Join and Strengthen Diverse Leaders for the Common Good.”

The Forum was designed to be a beginning. We are planning continued engagement, and exploring how we go deeper with our regional leaders.

In the Fall of 2026, we will be announcing the Bridge Houston Fellowship, an intentionally facilitated experience for leaders ready to redefine their approach to tackling the issues of education, workforce, and economic mobility for our region.

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“The convening showed me that purposeful collaboration—with aligned goals, transparent processes, and shared accountability—can rapidly turn promising ideas into scalable action.”

- Bridge Practitioner



Sponsor Acknowledgement

For the Bridge Houston Forum, our sponsors committed \$58,500 in direct support alongside \$38,000 in in-kind contribution, bringing total sponsor support to \$96,500. This generosity enabled ALF to create the conditions for more than 90 leaders to come together, connect across sectors and communities, and begin building the trust that collective action requires.

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1801 Main Street, Suite 910 | Houston, TX 77002 | ALFHouston.org