

Community organizing for SSE initiatives

or how to get to know your allies, supporters and members not by “guessing” their stance, but by actively approaching them and involving them in a dialogue through the method called a one-on-one (or one-to-one) meeting.

Re-creating the community

The challenge in today’s atomized society is often to re-create community – to restore relationships between and among people to overcome avoidance, insularity, apathy or learned helplessness. To establish sustainable, trusting and collaborative relationships takes a special set of skills. These organizing skills are exemplified in what has become known as the one-on-one (one-to-one) or relational meeting – the basis of democratic organizing.

As it has been proven in many instances, a supportive community is the bedrock of SSE initiatives – projects and enterprises embedded in communities and focused on community needs have a higher likelihood of success and longer-term sustainability.

A long-term experience from using the one-on-one method in community organizing for social change is that it is an approach enabling deliberate conversations with people. It helps to focus on building relationships that may be necessary for the success of any SSE initiative.

What is the One-on-One

The one-on-one is a planned meeting between two individuals in which they establish a personal ‘public’ relationship. **It is a strategic meeting used to shed light on the problems and issues people care about (their self-interests) and to figure out another person’s ideas, motivations and visions and identify where they intersect with yours.** It is a purposeful semi-structured conversation/dialogue in which the organizer ensures the main protagonist is the other person, to gain insight into his/her values and priorities.

It is the best way to find out what makes people engaged in the community, what makes them “tick”, where mutual interests overlap. The one-on-one is an efficient and tested way to invite someone to join your group or initiative or to build relationships and learn more about e.g. your neighbors’ or community members’ concerns.

This is why one-on-ones are a bedrock technique for bringing new people into teams, for developing leaders, and for maintaining relationships with active members.

Building meaningful relationships is key to building power for any successful grassroots movement. One-on-one meetings are a great way to build your base; the first step in creating a shared vision and commitment to act. It is also an opportunity to learn about the person’s experiences, networks, and skills to open up a conversation about what role might be the best fit for them in your initiative.

How to proceed and what to keep in mind

1. Before the meeting takes place

- Identify people who might be interested in your initiative/organization. Think about your community networks. They could be neighbors, classmates, colleagues, community members, or family members. You can also go to community events to talk about your issue with people and invite anyone who is interested to have a One-on-One with you.
- Make a friendly, honest invitation, explain the purpose of the meeting, be clear about what you want. For example, you could say, “I’m forming a small group for starting (an SSE initiative), and I’d like to have your input,” or “I’m concerned about (an issue) and want to hear your concerns too,” or “I think that a lot of people are struggling with economic stress alone, and I want to ask you what we might do to support each other ...”
- Do some preparation: what do you already know about the person you're meeting with, what questions do you want to ask them, what do you want to share about your experience, what commitment do you want to get, and the like.
- Follow up with the person two days ahead of time and the day of the one-on-one to confirm that they're planning to meet with you.
- Set aside enough time for a focused conversation (usually around 30-45 mins.)
- Pick a comfortable and quiet location at people’s places or places they feel comfortable at, and at the time of their convenience.

2. At the meeting – Agenda of one-on-ones

One-on-ones often follow this basic outline, but each conversation will be unique. Hence, you do not need to think about these elements of the One-on-One agenda as a rigid structure, but rather as a guide to lead your conversation.

Tell your story (but keep it brief, the main focus is on the other person)

Who or what sparked your interest in social change? Why are you committed to building an SSE initiative? How will it benefit your community, your family, your personal situation?

Ask and Listen Then turn to the other person and ask open-ended questions that should help you to figure out what you have in common with the other person

For instance: what are they curious and passionate about, what makes them angry, what is their idea of a good life, what issues are important, why they care about those issues, what do they like about their community, what they think are the biggest problems their community is facing, what would they improve and how, what has been their past involvement in community organizing...and so forth.

Note your common concerns. As you listen, pay attention for any common ground you share, and note it after the person has had a chance to talk.

Call to Action. You might then say, “I want to form (an initiative) and we want to have a nucleus of good people who care involved. Are you open to an invitation to attend our first meeting/join our group?”

A successful One-on-One meeting ends with a commitment to take action that includes a specific date, time, and goal.

3. After the One-on-One meeting

Follow-up: After a One-on-One meeting, follow-up is essential to both building the relationship and ensuring action. Organizers must follow up on One-on-Ones to express gratitude, ensure completion of initial commitments, and deepen relationships. You may want to express your gratitude e.g. by writing thank you notes, send emails, or making follow-up thank you calls. You can also mention people you have a One-on-One with on social media networks, with their permission, of course.

Keep Promises: Make a list of any commitments you make to the supporter. Make sure to fulfill these commitments in a timely manner. **Relationships are built on trust, and you build trust as an organizer when you keep the commitments you make to supporters.**

Summary

Each One-to-One is unique but all share common characteristics:

- Face-to-Face: One-to-Ones are conducted in person and in a quiet place.
- Scheduled: One-to-Ones are scheduled in advance for 30-45 minutes.
- Purposeful: One-to-Ones have an agenda and purpose. They are not just a casual conversation.
- Educational: One-to-Ones are about listening. The organizer should absorb where the other person is coming from and seek to understand what they are saying.
- End with an Ask and Action Item(s): Organizers should go into every One-to-Ones meeting knowing a few actions they might want to ask the supporter to take. Then, upon learning more about the supporter’s background, skills and interests, the organizer should prioritize the most appropriate ask for the situation.
- Follow-Up: The onus is on the organizer to follow up afterward and help the new member be successful in engaging in action.

Important points to remember:

Remember that the primary purpose of one-on-ones is to build relationships and personalize your ideas and efforts to the needs and interests of other potential members and supporters of your initiative.

- One-to-One requires curiosity and genuine interest in others.
- It takes sensitivity and good active listening skills, i.e. it requires the listener to focus on the answers provided by the other person and to ask detailed follow-up questions.
- You are not likely to hear an enthusiastic “Yes, I’ll join you!” at the end of every conversation. It’s best to prepare for a range of responses. No matter how skilled you are as an organizer and conversationalist, some people will say “No” to your invitation. Some will say “Maybe” (which generally means “No”). Some will say “Yes,” but won’t show up. Some will say “Yes,” show up, and

then drop out. Some will say “No” today, and “Yes” later. And luckily, some will say “Yes” and become valuable contributors. :)

Dos and Donts

DO

Schedule a time to have this conversation (usually 30 to 60 minutes).

Plan to listen and ask questions.

Follow certain steps of the conversation according to a planned purpose of the meeting.

Share experiences and deep motivations, tell your story.

Share a vision that articulates a shared set of interests for change.

Be clear about the ‘when and what’ of your next step together.

DON'T

Be unclear about purpose and length of conversation.

Try to persuade rather than listen and ask questions.

Chit chat “all over the place” about anything that comes to your mind.

Rush the conversation or skip stories to “get to the point.”

Miss the opportunity to share ideas about how things can change.

End the conversation without a clear plan for the next steps.

Sources:

This material is a compilation based on the following sources

<https://grantcraft.org/content/takeaways/methods-of-community-organizing/>

https://www.du.edu/ccesl/media/documents/ccesl_handbook_third_edition_print_protected.pdf

<https://selfadvocacyinfo.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/One-on-Ones-PDF.pdf>

<https://residentactionproject.files.wordpress.com/2017/05/one-on-ones-toolkit-for-organizing.pdf>

<https://womensmarch.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/WMFieldGuideOne-on-OneMeetings.pdf>

<https://localcircles.org/2012/10/04/how-to-have-a-one-to-one-conversation/>

Video – one-on-one conversation – a model situation from a community organizing seminar

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4CARmuVJuqo>

