

RESIST. REVOLT.

A FIELD GUIDE FOR ORGANIZERS & ADVOCATES

Relational Organizing

Movements aren't built by posts or flyers. They're built one conversation, one relationship at a time.



Why relationships · The one-on-one · Questions · AEIOU · Building networks · Worksheet

01 Power Is Relational

Relational organizing builds collective power through real relationships: people bringing in people they know, and organizers having deep, intentional conversations that move people to act together.

The core tool is the **one-on-one** (also called a relational meeting): a focused, face-to-face conversation of about 30 to 45 minutes to learn what someone cares about, why, and whether they're ready to act on it with others. It is the basic unit of organizing. Unions, faith-based community organizations, and tenant movements have built power this way for generations.

Why it works

- **Trust moves people.** People act when someone they know and respect asks them, not when an algorithm does.
- **It finds leaders.** Conversations reveal who has passion, a story, and followers of their own.
- **It builds a durable base.** Relationships survive a lost vote, a bad news cycle, or a platform ban. Lists alone don't.
- **It surfaces the real issues.** Listening first means the campaign fights for what people actually care about.

Read through a class lens

Capitalism isolates us: separate shifts, separate apartments, separate screens, each of us told our problems are personal. Relational organizing reverses that. Each conversation connects one person's private hardship to a shared condition and a shared enemy. Solidarity isn't a feeling we wait for. It's something we build, deliberately, person by person.

Strong people don't need strong leaders.

WIDELY ATTRIBUTED TO ELLA BAKER

Baker spent her life building leadership in ordinary people rather than relying on a few charismatic figures. The one-on-one is how that work gets done.

02 What a One-on-One Is (and Isn't)

A one-on-one is not a sales pitch, a survey, or a chat. It is a purposeful conversation to build a public relationship.

It is

- Intentional: you set it up with a clear purpose.
- Mostly listening: aim for them talking 70 percent of the time.
- About values and self-interest: what they care about and why.
- Honest about power: who is responsible, and what we can do.
- Ends with a clear ask and a next step.

It isn't

- Reading a script or rattling off talking points.
- Arguing or trying to win a debate.
- Therapy, or prying into private matters.
- Recruiting people into tasks they don't care about.
- A one-time transaction you never follow up on.

What you're listening for

- Their **story**: what shaped them.
- Their **self-interest**: what they want for themselves and their family.
- Their **anger and hope**: what moves them.
- Their **relationships**: who they know and influence.
- Signs of **leadership**: do others follow them?

What success looks like

- You both learned something real about each other.
- You found a shared interest to act on.
- They agreed to a concrete next step.
- You know who else they could bring.
- You both want to talk again.

03 How to Run a One-on-One

1

Set it up

Ask for 30 to 45 minutes in person, or by video if needed. Be clear why: "I'm talking with folks in the building about what's going on here, and I'd love to hear your take." Pick a comfortable place: their porch, a break room, a coffee shop.

2

Open with credibility

Introduce yourself and why you're there in a sentence or two. Share a bit of your own story so it's a two-way relationship, not an interview.

3

Explore their story

Ask open questions and follow the energy. "How long have you lived here? What's it like? What do you love? What's hard?" Listen for values, interests, and relationships.

4

Agitate (with care)

When an issue surfaces, go deeper: "How does that affect your family? How long has it been going on? How does it make you feel?" Agitation isn't manipulation. It helps people feel the gap between how things are and how they should be.

5

Connect it to power

Ask who is responsible and who could fix it. Then share how others are facing the same thing, and that together you have more power than alone.

6

Share the vision and plan

Briefly describe the campaign: the demand, the plan to win, and how people like them are already involved.

7

Make a clear ask

Ask for a specific, meaningful commitment that fits them: come to the meeting Thursday, talk to three neighbors, sign the petition and host a house meeting. Then be quiet and let them answer.

8

Follow up within 48 hours

Thank them, confirm the commitment, and log what you learned. A one-on-one without follow-up is just a conversation.

04 Questions That Open People Up

OPENING

- “What brought you to this job, neighborhood, or school?”
- “What do you like most about it?”
- “Tell me about your family.”

ISSUES

- “What’s the hardest part of working or living here?”
- “Has it always been this way? What changed?”
- “What would you change if you could?”

GOING DEEPER

- “How does that affect you and your family?”
- “How does that make you feel?”
- “Why do you think it’s like this?”

POWER

- “Who makes the decisions about this?”
- “Have you or others ever tried to change it? What happened?”
- “What would it take for them to listen?”

RELATIONSHIPS

- “Who do you talk to about this at work or home?”
- “Who do people go to when there’s a problem?”
- “Who else should I talk to?”

THE ASK

- “Would you be willing to...?”
- “What would make it possible for you to come?”
- “Who could you bring with you?”

Listening skills

Ask open questions (how, what, why) rather than yes/no. Ask “why?” more than you think you should. Reflect back what you hear. Let silence work. Take only brief notes, and never pass judgment.

05 The AEIOU Model

Many labor organizers structure organizing conversations with AEIOU. It works for tenants and communities too.

A • Agitate

Help the person name the problems they face and feel why they matter. Ask about the issues, and why they care.

E • Educate

Share who is responsible, how the problem is connected to others, and how collective action has won before.

I • Inoculate

Prepare them for what the boss or landlord will do: scare tactics, promises, divide-and-conquer. If they expect it, it loses its power.

O • Organize

Make the ask: a concrete action that moves them and the campaign forward, with a time and place.

U • Unite

Connect them to others: introduce them to coworkers or neighbors, a committee, a meeting. Isolation is the enemy.

Common mistakes

- Talking more than listening.
- Skipping agitation and going straight to the ask.
- Asking for too little, or nothing at all.
- Never following up.

06 From Conversations to a Network

Map your circles

- List everyone you know: family, coworkers, neighbors, congregation, teammates, classmates.
- Mark who is affected by the issue and who might care.
- Ask every new member to do the same. This is relational organizing at scale.

House meetings

- A member invites 6 to 12 people they know to their home.
- Everyone shares their story about the issue.
- End with an ask to join and to host the next one.
- Each meeting grows the base and surfaces new leaders.

Find the organic leaders

Leaders aren't the loudest people. They're the ones others already trust and follow. Ask "who do people go to?" and put your energy into one-on-ones with them.

The ladder of engagement

- Move people step by step: sign » attend » bring a friend » take a role » lead.
- Every ask should be one rung higher than the last.
- Track where each person is (see the Data & Lists guide).

Relational digital tools

Use text and social to keep in touch with people you already know, not to replace real conversations. Peer-to-peer texting and personal messages beat mass blasts.

Set goals

- Organizers: aim for a set number of one-on-ones every week.
- Track conversations, commitments, and follow-ups.
- Review together; celebrate progress.

Fill out right after each one-on-one, then enter it into your database.

SUPPORT LEVEL ☐ 1 Leader ☐ 2 Strong supporter ☐ 3 Undecided ☐ 4 Leaning against ☐ 5 Opposed

One conversation at a time, until we are everyone.

Listen first. Find what moves people. Ask them to act. Then do it again,
and teach them to do it too.

RESIST. REVOLT.

Further reading

Jane McAlevey, *No Shortcuts: Organizing for Power in the New Gilded Age* (2016).

Edward T. Chambers, *Roots for Radicals: Organizing for Power, Action, and Justice* (2003).

Marshall Ganz, *Why David Sometimes Wins* (2009).

Companion guides: *Power Mapping*, *Data & Lists*, *Collective Care*, and *Grassroots Fundraising* (Resist. Revolt.)