

## **One on One Meetings to Find and Develop Leaders**

This article by Lew Finfer was published in [Roots to Power: A Manual for Grassroots Organizing](#) by Lee Staples

All organizing must focus on finding and developing leaders for an organization. The most intensive way to do this is through one-to-one meetings which are sometimes referred to as “one-on-ones” or written as 1:1’s. We are looking for leaders, defined as those individuals who can organize others to act with them on their shared interests. Organizations need many leaders, and 1:1’s are the best way to find potential leaders and to develop their abilities to step up and take more responsibility.

### **Definition:**

A 1:1 relational meeting is a 30-45 minute, face-to-face intense conversation, held to begin or to deepen a public working relationship.

Or more directly, it’s a chance to find out, “what makes this person tick?”

For people of faith, you are encountering the holy, divine part of another person, as all people “are made in the image of God.”

### **Who are 1:1's done with?**

They are done with potential and current leaders for your organization. By potential leaders for your organization, this means people who have gone to larger meetings but are not part of a leadership planning team or people recommended by other leaders or allies. 1:1's also are done with allies or potential allies. And sometimes, they even can be done with current or potential opponents.

### **What's the difference between a transactional/task outreach and a relational 1:1?**

The first person I ever spoke to as an organizer in Boston was Mrs. Lida Harkins in September 1970 at 165 East Cottage Street in the Dorchester neighborhood of Boston. I knocked on her door and said, “Hello, I’m Lew Finfer, from the Dorchester Tenants Action Council. Do you have any housing code violations?” She did. And we talked and she got involved a little in our organization, signing letters with other tenants and going to a few meetings. I didn’t learn that much else about her and her life, but we worked together with some other tenants to get her code violations fixed.

This was what I would call a transactional 1:1 form of meeting and outreach. An organization may be seeing how many people care about an issue that it’s working on and tries to involve the person based on that. Or an organization may be “fishing” to find out which problems the greatest number of people care

about. Then, the group proceeds to try to work on those issues and involve those interested individuals in that effort. Incidentally along the way, you might find out more about the person's background or motivation, but this does not necessarily happen.

A relational 1:1 meeting is different. You are looking for potential leaders for your organization and not necessarily trying to determine whether they are affected by some specific issue. In order to know if they have potential as a leader, you have to talk with them about what they've been involved in and if that's been in the community, in their religious congregation, at work, participating in a service group, as a member of a union, or standing up for their kids or someone else. You also want to know something about their background, such as where they grew up, what work they do, why they do this work, the reasons they belong to this church, and why they live in this neighborhood. And you even try to determine if there was some turning point experience in their life.

And yes, you also do ask them what problems they care deeply about in their community or where they work. But you don't stop there, because that's just doing a survey. You probe deeper through conversation, asking why this problem is important; whether there's a story about how this problem affects them directly or those whom they care about; why it's happening; what should be done about it; and if they've ever tried to do something about it. There's no right or wrong answers to these probing questions, but you will find some answers more thoughtful than others.

So, Herman Brown was a middle aged African-American man I sat down with to do a relational 1:1. At one point, I asked, "Mr. Brown, what problems do you care deeply about?"

He said, "I care about the kids and the crime."

I asked, "Why is that Mr. Brown?"

He said, "You know there's a lot going on out there with kids and violence."

I said, "I know that Mr. Brown, but is there some story about how this affects you or people you care about?"

He said, "My nephew is 12 and was riding his bike on Hansborough Street when he got shot in the leg by gangs that were shooting at someone else."

Now, not everyone has such a story behind what they are deeply worried about, but there's usually some type of story and you won't know it unless you look for it.

Sometimes you have to tell the story about why you feel deeply about a problem so the other person will get what you're talking about and will trust you enough to tell you their own story.

## What are the key things to remember when doing relational 1:1's?

### 1:1's are NOT

Task-specific

1 way interviews

Lengthy

Casual conversation

Looking for friends

### 1:1's ARE

Relational

2 Way conversations

30-45 minutes

A planned action to find potential leaders,  
and/or challenge people to take a next step

Looking for potential leaders

## What are the four sets of key questions in a 1:1 relational meeting?

**1. Leadership:** What have you been involved in (at your religious congregation, in the community, at work, at school) that you are proud that you participated in?

**2. Story:** What else can you learn about their story, especially about major turning points in their life?

**3. Deeply felt concerns:** What are you deeply worried and upset about **and why? Is there a story** you can tell me about how this affects you or those you care about?

**4. Proposition:** Based on your concern, would you be willing to (attend this meeting, talk to me again after I talk to others, etc.)?

Here is a more detailed version of conducting a 1:1 meeting, but REMEMBER that it all comes down to a two way conversation about the above three questions:

### Sections of a 1:1 meeting

1. Introduction/Credential—Start with how you got their name, why you are meeting with them, and who you are related to in the congregation/organization.

2. “Breaking the ice”— Start with easier to answer questions like, “How long have you lived here?” “What kinds of work do you do?” “What brought you to this congregation?” etc.

3. Learn about key moments in their story, such as when they’ve been a leader, often by first sharing something about your own story.

“I want to ask you about some of your concerns for the congregation/organization and community. But, before I do that I want to get to know you better.”

a) “First, let me tell you a little about myself and what shaped me.” Tell them something about your background, especially some key events that shaped you; what you do now; and how you overcame this problem, etc.

**And tell them something about your leadership** and involvement that you are proud of because it’s made a difference.

b. **Then ask them to tell you something about themselves** such as their leadership/involvement in some organization, congregation, union, or activity....and such as what events or decisions shaped their life **and something they’re involved in that they are proud of. REMEMBER, you are looking for potential leaders.**

4. Learn about their deeply felt Self-interests

a. Tell them first about your own interests in order to give them an example:

“I want to know what you really care about or worry about concerning our community (or your work, health, schools, etc.).” “But to give you a sense of what I mean, let me tell you what I’m especially worried about.” Tell them why this is so and a story that shows this.

b. Then, ask them to tell you what they really worry about in the community or at work and why; and what the story about this is.

c. Then, ask them what should be done about this problem. Ask if they’ve ever tried to do something about it.

5. Proposition

Based on what you learned about their deeply felt interests and worries about a community or work concern, you can make a proposition or proposal about some next steps, based on their interests.

a. It could be as “mild” as saying, “Thanks for meeting with me, could we talk again sometime after I’ve talked to more people?”

b. **It often should go further and you could ask** “Based on your interest and concern about \_\_\_\_\_, you might be interested in the committee we have at our congregation working on concerns like that.”

“Would you be willing to come to one of our meetings?”

c. You may risk challenging or agitating them to consider getting involved if they have told you about a problem they feel strongly about.

## 6. Closing

Thank them for meeting with you. If you feel good about their potential for leadership, you could also ask them for names of other people they suggest you talk with.

## 7. Evaluating afterwards

a. What did you learn about this person’s story, leadership, and interests that is important?

b. Do you want to follow up with them as a potential leader to try to get them more involved?

c. Is there some question you should have asked more about? Are there some “why” questions that might have helped you get to know them even more?

Do NOT take notes during a 1:1 so people can feel it's a thoughtful conversation not some survey. You can say, can I write down a note on this so I don't remember. But after the 1:1 ends, it helps to write down some notes on the above questions that can help you remember what the person said.

## **Evaluation and Skills in Doing 1:1's**

No single 1:1 can enable you to learn all or most of what's important about another person. The best 1:1's make you determined to hold another such conversation to learn more and to deepen your public relationship. However, several criteria to evaluate any 1:1 are listed below. You won't meet all of these criteria in every 1:1, but you should work to meet as many of them as possible. You should evaluate all 1:1's based on some of these criteria so you can be even more effective in subsequent ones that you do.

**1. Story**--- Did you learn something important about their story and their background, such as a key event that shaped them, especially when they've shown leadership during their life?

**2. Self Interest**--Did you learn something about their self-interests in terms of what they are upset/concerned/angry about, WHY this is important to them, the story about why this is important to them, and/or whether they are looking for a deeper sense of meaning in their life?

**3. Probing**--- Did you ask any "why questions"? If there is a thread of a sensitive area a person brings up, did I avoid it or did I ask, "Is it alright if I ask you more about what you meant when you said \_\_\_\_\_?" If you just say, "tell me more about that", it can seem like prying, but if you ask permission then you are probing. If you do not probe at what might seem to be a sensitive thread that a person brings up, you might miss what's really important about that person.

Sometimes, people put out a thread like, "That was a difficult time for me." Your first inclination could be to go to some other topic since the person obviously is thinking, but not talking, about a sensitive experience for them. But if you just asked directly for more information ("Tell me about that"), they'd think you were prying. However, if instead you asked permission to explore this area further ("Could I ask you to say more about what you meant when you said that was a difficult time for you?"), then you are probing and not prying. The person certainly has the right to tell you they don't want to say more, but in 95% or more of these conversations, they will tell you more because you asked them sensitively. And then you know a lot more about "what makes that person tick." And to build trust, you also might tell them about some important and difficult experience that you've had.

**4. Propositioning**--Did you make a proposal to them about a possible next step in your relationship and with your organization based on their self-interests?

e.g. "Can we meet again some-time after I've talked to more people in the congregation/organizations (or because of what you said you were concerned about)?" Or, "If our congregation/organization was to try to do something about\_\_\_\_, which you said was important to you, would you be interested in working on this with us?" Or, "Would you want to take a look at what we're doing at this upcoming meeting, action, etc.?" When doing this, you are trying to see how they react to this proposal based on their interests.

**5. Sharing**--Did you share anything about your story, your interests?

Although you are trying to learn what makes the other person "tick" and to draw them out to be talking more than you do in the 1:1 meeting, you also want this not to be a one-way conversation. Part of their decision to possibly get involved is whether you are an interesting and compelling person, and they can learn this if it's not a one-way conversation. Part of this is whether they trust you, which also may happen when you share what's important to you and why, instead of only asking questions and listening.

**6. Agitating**--When you develop some relationship with another person by holding 1:1's and/or working with them on something in your congregation or organization, you can agitate or challenge them on something they said or something you think they could do for that congregation or organization.

So, then you ask yourself about your relationship with this person, "Did I take any risk to challenge or question something the other person said?"

Your goal is to see whether you can and want to form a public working relationship, but sometimes a little challenge can be a part of building respect and deepening that relationship.

ex. Asking, “ Have you ever tried to do something about the problem you mentioned?” If they say “no”, are you asking gently, “Why not?”

OR if they say they are really upset about some problem but when you try to discuss some way they could do something about it and they give you a vague answer. You might risk saying, help me understand what you are feeling John. You said you really care about this problem, right? But when I asked you about some ways to do something about it, you seem cautious. What are you thinking on this or what else should we discuss about how something could be done about this?

### **What about ongoing 1:1's with leaders who already are involved?**

In these 1:1's, there's usually a task to discuss, such as their role in an upcoming meeting or how they feel about the current issue or the strategy on it. But better to begin with some relational conversation about themselves, their family, their work, and/or their congregation/organization and what's new for them. Also, it's good to bring up some current event from their neighborhood, city, or their country of origin that you think would be of interest to you, such as their opinion and how they think about it. And you can share some insight you have about this as well.

Then, there usually is some task related to an upcoming meeting or strategy that you can discuss and work out with them.

Let's remember that the definition of a leader is "Someone who can organize others to act with them on shared goals." So, in these ongoing 1:1's, you also can talk about work which that leader can do in order to stay in touch with the base of people they know - individuals they either have involved or could involve in the organization's work by doing their own 1:1's.

### **What's different about 1:1's with clergy?**

Besides all the questions about their story, leadership, and concerns, there are several additional areas to explore in 1:1's with clergy. You can ask about their congregation, including its strengths and challenges. One organizer's probing question was, "what gives you life and fulfillment in your work and what is deathly or difficult?" You can ask about their vision for the congregation and where they hope to take it in the next 3-5 years. You can ask about what parts of their ministry they enjoy and why, as well as what's hard and why that's so. You can even ask about why they became a member of the clergy. Some might tell you

their "call" story or how they may have felt a personal experience with God that called them to the ministry.

Clergy are at the gate of their congregation and should not readily give you access to it unless you have built a relationship that includes knowing their personal and congregational goals, while they learn more about you and your organization. That often requires holding a number of 1:1's.

If you develop the relationship, clergy can be part of your thinking partners who help you develop a consensus about what needs to be done to build your organization. And you can be one of their partners in thinking through parts of their ministry.

### **1:1's with Allies, Policy People, and Even with Opponents**

These meetings may seem more formal and you may feel reluctant to see them as 1:1's. But it can help you understand the person better if you explain, "I want to ask you about such and such issue, but first it would help me to learn something about you for a few minutes and for me to say something about myself and my organization."

You could spend 5-10 minutes exploring why they do what they do, how long they've done it, what they did before, and where they grew up. Then, tell them briefly about yourself and your organization or do that first and then ask about them. After that, you can go into what you want to learn or say about the issue, policy, or organization they work for. But that initial mini 1:1 might end up better informing the rest of the conversation and giving you more of a feel for that person as a potential ally and something about "what makes them tick".

### **So, where do I begin?**

Actually, **start by doing a 1:1 with yourself!!** Think about and answer those key questions you will be asking others, but do it for yourself and you will be more conscious of the "bag of stories" you can draw on. A one-to-one must be a two-way conversation, not you just firing question after question at the other person. Ideally, you want them talking 65% of the time, but not 90%. Therefore, you want to share some of your own story. So answer those key questions about what shaped your values and who you are and what you do.....

- a) What institutions, what persons, what mentors if any, what experiences, what turning points shaped you and how and why?
- b) What leadership experience and involvement with your community, work, congregation, or school are you proud about?
- c) Are there any turning points in your life where you faced a crisis, a barrier, and what happened



c) What experiences with race, class, immigration, and politics were important to your learning and development?

d) And also for you, what problems/issues are you upset about, why, and what's the story you'd tell about this?

Once you've had a long 1:1 with yourself and written down some of the answers and the stories, then you can be ready to do 1:1 relational meetings. You will have all this material to draw from to tell pieces of your own story as appropriate during a 1:1 meeting. And if you hold on to this written exercise, you will remember more stories to add to it. You can then go back to it each year and add some key stories from your work during that past year. It can be a living, breathing dynamic document about your own learning and self-reflection.

## **Conclusion**

The organizer, Larry McNeil, thoughtfully stated in an article that effective organizing is enabling people to tell their stories with the pain they feel, then to interpret those stories based on our democratic and faith traditions, and then to take action together, so we can change something about the present circumstances that cause these painful stories. This enables us to write some more hopeful stories going forward.

One-to-Ones are about really enabling people to tell their stories. Nothing in organizing can be more uplifting, challenging, and moving than these 1:1 relational meetings. You get to learn someone's story and some of their dreams. You show respect to another by your concern to have such a conversation; you are saying, I care about who you are and what you think. All the power to do something effective on issues comes from how many leaders and active members you have. At the heart of finding and developing leaders are these unforgettable 1:1 meetings.

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