

How to run a relational meeting

Training goals

By the end of this training, participants will be able to:

1. Perform a relational meeting
2. Articulate why relational meetings are the foundation of community power
3. Make a plan for how they will use relational meetings to build community power and cohesion

Description of the tool

Relational meetings, sometimes called one-to-one meetings, are the foundation of any effort to build community power. Power, according to political theorist Hannah Arendt, describes the ability to act in concert. Acting in concert with others requires a deep understanding of their interests, and how those interests might align in common efforts. Organizers will often facilitate dozens of such meetings at the start of any community effort. Moreover, they can be used as a tool for faith communities seeking to discern common mission or call.

Relational meetings are short, focused, one-on-one conversations that aim to surface common interests. They seek the story of why: why do you do what you do? What motivates you? What formative experiences have shaped your orientation to your neighborhood, to your city? In the language of community organizing, these are public conversations that aim to establish a public relationship. Political friendships or public relationships are neither merely utilitarian nor personal. Rather, they involve a dialogue about our deepest passions (interests) that locates those interests in our stories, biographical and communal. Public relationships are oriented toward identifying shared values in those stories and then acting on those values in concert with others. By listening with curiosity to another, these meetings aim to identify the shared interests that can be the basis of collective action and community power.

For people of faith, listening deeply is not merely an act of neighborly kindness, but can be a way of attending to God within others. As German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in his book on Christian community *Life Together* that “the first service that one owes to others in the fellowship consists in listening to them. Just as love to God begins with listening to His Word, so the beginning of love for the brethren is learning to listen to them. It is God’s love for us that He not only gives us His Word but also lends us His ear.” Listening to others is an act of love, one that builds our collective capacity for justice.

Some of us have learned this skill simply by watching the leaders in our communities: a grandmother, a pastor, a neighbor, or a teacher who asked curious questions that moved past small talk. Others of us might need some help and practice to get into this mode of listening for the passion, energy, and motivations of others. One heuristic that you might use is asking about the past, present, and future. Regardless of whether you’re a natural, or need more training, the following aims to give you the chance to practice a relational meeting and reflect on its promise.

Training activities

00 Introducing relational meetings

To begin, welcome the group and orient them to the task of the day. You could start with an open ended question like: “What is power?” Or “What are the primary tasks of organizing?” If you have a group that is already familiar with the work of social change, you might ask them to hold in their mind an organizer that they admire and ask, “what did they do to call you into action?” Whatever the case, your goal as a trainer is to get some voices into the room while setting the topic for the hour that follows. Orient the conversation toward power, and relational meetings as the basis of power.

If you are feeling like some additional explanation of relational meetings could be helpful, you can consider projecting the video produced by the IAF titled “Ernesto Cortes on Relational Meetings” (see the citations below for a link).

05 Demonstrating a relational meeting in a fishbowl

The most important work of this training comes from performing relational meetings. After setting the topic, you can demonstrate a relational meeting in a fishbowl format. Ask for a volunteer to join you at the front (or better in the center) of the room. Perform a relational meeting:

- Start with an introduction of who you are and why you’ve invited them to talk with you.
- Ask about where they are from, seeking the story of how their political and faith commitments have come to be.
- Ask about their current activities and commitments. Again, seek the story of why they have prioritized the practices they have.
- Ask about their hopes for the future. Try to learn what they willing to work for.

15 Evaluating the relational meeting fishbowl

After about 10 minutes of the relational meeting demonstration, break the “fourth wall” and invite the group to reflect on that experience. What did you see or hear? What was revealed in that conversation? What interests did you note? You can help facilitate evaluation by suggesting ways that you might have improved or questions you might have asked but didn’t.

20 Relational meeting role plays (10 minutes each pair)

Invite the group to break into pairs and do a relational meeting. Sometimes you’ll end up with an odd number so a group of three is okay. Encourage them to get curious, seek the story of why, and look for common interests.

Remind the group to switch roles at 10 minutes so that each member of the pair has an opportunity to practice.

40 Evaluating relational meeting role plays

Call participants back together and invite them to reflect on the experience. What did you see or hear? What was revealed in that conversation? What interests did you note? Invite further reflection by asking, how might such a practice be utilized to build community power? In what ways did you hear the Spirit through this practice?

50 Make a plan for using relational meetings in your context

Conclude the training with a think/pair/share exploring how participants could use this practice in their context. Ask participants to take out a sheet of paper and write a proposal for how they could utilize relational meetings within their organization, church, or campaign? Give them three minutes to write, and then invite them to turn and share their plan with a neighbor. Close out the time by asking for volunteers to articulate their own commitments for using relational meetings going forward.

Additional resources

Christens, Brian D. "Public Relationship Building in Grassroots Community Organizing: Relational Intervention for Individual and Systems Change." *Journal of Community Psychology* 38, no. 7 (August 3, 2010): 886–900. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.20403>.

Industrial Areas Foundation. *Ernesto Cortes on Relational Meetings*, 2014. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g42mLGATG-c&list=PL3Odz51qEtHBkB4l3ztq7YHENYzVgccOP&index=2&ab_channel=WestSouthwestIAF.

Gecan, Michael. *Effective Organizing for Congregational Renewal: A Study Guide*. Chicago: ACTA Publications, 2008.

Lambelet, Kyle B. T. "A One-to-One on the Road to Emmaus." *Daily Theology* (blog), May 5, 2017. <https://dailytheology.org/2017/05/05/a-one-to-one-on-the-road-to-emmaus/>.