



Organizing Essentials

#1: Power Rests in Relationship

Within the field of social action, there are various approaches. What distinguishes organizing from other approaches is the focus on building and sustaining a grassroots, primarily volunteer leadership base, or "people power." Organizing is distinctive in that organizers and volunteer leaders make an ongoing and focused investment in recruiting people to the organization and in training large numbers of people in the art of organizing.

At the core of organizing practice is relationship building; the central organizing principle is "power rests in relationships." To build relationships is to build power. Organizers seek to build relationships with a shared purpose, or public relationships. By building relationships, we do not mean expanding one's circle of personal friends. We mean expanding the circle of those who have come together out of common values to build power and to act together for justice.

This consistent focus on relationship building enables a group to sustain an organizing effort over time. This practice enables us to win long-term campaigns and helps avoid the common pitfall of short-lived action/protest in which people act together for a brief period, usually in response to a crisis, but then do not sustain the activity.

The building of relationships is central to how PICO California is expanding voter power and changing election results. Through relational organizing, PICO California is training thousands of people to engage their networks of relationships to vote, and through voting, to transform our political landscape. In doing 1-1's, organizers not only build their local federations but, over time, strengthen the voting power of their local community and contribute to its transformation long-term.

In this article, we will provide a framework that explains:

- The basic elements of 1-1's
- Volume of 1-1s
- Ordering of 1-1s

Basic Elements of 1-1's

1-1's serve a variety of purposes. Organizers use 1-1's to build relationships with new or potential leaders for the effort. In these 1-1's, organizers seek to understand the person's self-interest, their values and their passions. We want to understand what moves people to act. We

also want to explain who we are, both as individuals and as organizations, and to briefly share the organization's history and wins.

Organizers also use 1-1's to think together with clergy, experienced leaders, and other partners to develop analysis and strategy and to evaluate and debrief. Organizers use 1-1's to prepare people as a team head into a research action or action and to debrief afterwards. We're the ones asking people to reflect on:

- What did we learn?
- Where should we go next?
- What did we learn about ourselves?

The following outlines the basic elements of a first-time 1-1:

1. Purpose and sharing of self

- State the purpose of the conversation and who you are and whom you represent
- Share a brief story of self

2. Use active listening to understand what's important to them

Ask curious, empowering, open-ended questions that help you understand what is at stake for this person, what they value and the vision they have for themselves and their community. Here are some ample questions:

- How long have you lived in this community? How have you seen it change?
- How are you and your family doing? What are some of the pressures you face?
- What concerns do you have? Do others in your community share those concerns?
- What does your faith say about the world we should live in?
- How have you seen racism, discrimination, disinvestment and predatory practices affect your community?
- What is your understanding of why these conditions exist?

3. Repeat back

A basic tool of active listening is to summarize what you are hearing and to repeat back the main points raised by the person. "What I hear you saying is...." At times it can be helpful to take notes

4. Invitation

Invite the person to take a next step, such as to attend an organizing team meeting, to recommend other people the organizer could do a 1-1 etc...

Volume

In PICO California, organizers are expected to do at least 15 1-1's a week. This high volume of 1-1's is crucial to building a large powerful organization. Let's do the math. If an organizer does 5 1-1's per week (on average), over a month, that adds up to 20 1-1's. Over 10 months, the organizer will do 200 1-1's. If an organizer does 15 1-1's per week, s/he will average 60 per month, or 600 over a 10-month period. 600 represents a far greater level of community engagement than 200. Over a period of a few years, a small team of organizers can engage a few thousand people in their local community.

To conduct a high volume of 1-1's on a regular basis, an organizer must be disciplined and creative. S/he must block out time in the calendar to contact people for 1-1's and must always be on lookout for new people. When doing 1-1's, organizers can ask people to suggest others for 1-1's. To do a lot of 1-1's, week after week, we have to be flexible and meet people where they are: before or after religious services, during a work lunch break, at laundromats and soccer games, and on the evenings and weekends. In doing 1-1's, we have to be careful with our time, and respectful of their time. A 1-1 should last between 20 and 40 minutes. If we take up too much time, the person with whom we are meeting may be reluctant to see us again.

As organizers, we face competition for our time. In urban areas with a large non-profit sector, organizers can find much of their time involved in coalition meetings. While coalition meetings are important, the time we spend there does take us away from building our own base. This is particularly true for times when organizers attend meetings alone. If a leader or a few leaders join an organizer in a coalition meeting, then the experience may support the development of those leaders and provide an opportunity for reflection and "thinking together." At times, leaders can represent the organization at some or all coalition meetings, without an organizer being present, depending on the context. Leaders also need to be engaged in coalitions developed and led by the local PICO California affiliate.

To discern how to spend our time, it can be helpful to distinguish between organizing hours and non-organizing hours. Organizing hours are any hours spent developing, uncovering, channeling the power & skills of leaders/clergy/community. Non-organizing hours are those that do not directly strengthen the organization's leadership base. Some non-organizing hours are essential, such as internal administrative work like timesheets or fundraising, or outside work like speaking engagements to external groups. In general, it's super important for an organizer to look at the week and strive to have a supermajority of one's time go into organizing hours.

Ordering of 1-1's

In addition to maintaining a high volume of 1-1's, it is important for an organizer to be deliberate about with whom s/he is doing 1-1's. Each week, an organizer should pursue 1-1's with top leaders, clergy, emerging leaders, and new people. To keep track of 1-1 opportunities, it can be helpful to keep lists, and to review and update those lists daily, or every few days. An organizer must ask, who are my top 15-20 leaders, those individuals who are actively building

the organization with me? Who are my thought partners with whom I am co-creating this effort? These leaders merit regular 1-1's and check-ins.

Then, ideally, there are another 20-30 emerging leaders who participate but who could step up if given the right opportunity and support. It's key to keep these leaders on one's radar screens and to be intentional about opportunities for them to develop further, such as through asking them to chair a research meeting, speak at a large action or rally, and/or using their relational networks for turnout. Through engaging this circle, an organizer can expand his/her number of core leaders.

And then there are those who are connected to, or are members of, the congregations and groups in the organizing effort, and/or who live in the neighborhood. This is the outer circle, those people whom you are referred to by a leader, or who have attended a meeting once or twice. An organizer's goal with this circle is to move people from the outer circle to the emerging leader circle. Organizers and leaders should pursue 1-1's with new people who come to a meeting or an action, and should keep hold of sign-in lists for 1-1's.

Finally, it's essential that organizers invest their 1-1 time in people who are the closest to the pain and to the issues the organization is seeking to address. In addition, it's important to take into account how 1-1's contribute to building racial and religious solidarity. PICO California is seeking to build a multi-racial, people power base and to build strong ties across race and religion. To achieve this goal, organizers must deliberate about where they choose to spend their time.