

Crucial Conversations

Why Relationships?

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Why are “relationships” so important? Why do you need to get to know someone, and why is it important for you to develop a personal (if “public”) relationship with them? There are a number of key reasons.

First, one of the key mottos of organizing is: “People don’t come to meetings because they see a flyer or read an announcement in the church bulletin. People come to meetings because someone invited them.” This is a powerful truth of human motivation. In the most basic sense, it’s much easier to go to a new place with new people if there is someone there that you “know.” Being invited also makes a person feel more important, it seems like it actually matters if they show up or not. And you can’t be accountable to a flyer. You are only accountable to another human being. If someone calls you up and invites you and you say yes, then you are accountable whether you follow through or not.

Second, people feel a part of organizations and actions not only because they care in abstract about an issue, but also because they feel connected to the individuals in that organization. In fact, within an organizing group, leaders will often do one-on-ones among themselves to strengthen their ties and help them understand the underlying motivations of the people around the table. The more relationships you have with people in an organization, the more you will feel a part of it and actually responsible for its success or failure.

Third, your relationship with someone allows you to engage with them around their self-interests or “passions.” If some random person calls you up and says, “I know your brother is in jail, and I know you care about sentencing laws,” you might even be offended. But someone who has had a personal conversation with you, and to whom you have made some accountable commitment, however small, has the right at least to call you up and talk with you about this—regardless of how you respond to them.

Fourth, once you do a lot of one-on-ones, the group you are a part of starts seeming less like an abstract collective and more like what it is, a collection of unique individuals drawn together for a range of diverse reasons and convictions, however structured your organization may be. You start to understand challenges and internal tensions in your organization in more complex terms. Someone once said to me, that:

“It’s not the idea, it’s the people.”

This is actually a pretty profound statement when you think about it. No matter how great your idea is, how “right” you are, you won’t get anywhere if you can’t get other people together around it. On the other hand, quite horrible ideas often get put into effect because enough people are willing to support them. If you don’t know your “people” then you won’t be able to understand which ideas will and won’t “go,” or how to get people to understand the “truth” of ideas you hold dear (even if you are actually wrong).

Finally, doing one-on-ones helps you understand what your “constituency” cares about. It is by doing one-on-ones that you can figure out what issues will really draw people together in collective action. One-on-ones are much more effective than surveys (which organizing groups also do) because one-on-ones push people to go beyond their surface or knee-jerk reactions to what motivates them at the core. This is what you need to know if you are going to expect them to commit for the long term.

