



Relationships in Organizing

Organizing, unlike activism, is always about collective action. The lone activist can protest outside an office, write a letter to the editor, or hand out flyers on a city street, but the organizer, whose ultimate aim is to build a shared purpose within their community, knows that their power is inextricably linked to the number of relationships they are able to forge and sustain over time. Those relationships need to be continuously fostered and maintained overtime, so that power continues instead of fizzling out. It's the difference between a one off project or campaign, and a grassroots community that is active for years to come. Power is a measure of your group's ability to create change, and so you can think of it as the process of increasing your ability to make change.

When you build power you are essentially building a community. There are a few ways to view building power, it could be seen as building your team, building your network of allies, building up behavioral changes in your community. In this instance it can be all of them, but to be more specific it is the people outside your team. You need to create a community outside of yourselves so that when you graduate, or move on to something else, that community will continue to use that power for further changemaking. It's about movement building, and this is done by building and fostering community relationships.

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1. Key terms

Community: a group of people with a shared interest. Example: a soccer team, bingo club, a school, yogi/yoga enthusiasts (for more information, read: [Identifying and Influencing Your Communities](#))

Constituency: A group of people willing to act on behalf of a shared interest. They are typically coming from different groups, such as a school group working with a non-profit organization.



Your team and/or your community



A constituency or network of allies

Relationships in organizing can take many forms. For example, they can look like the relationships between managers and volunteers in an election office, the collaboration between two neighbours working on a community garden project, or the forging of unlikely alliances between hunters and environmentalists for a conservation campaign. Broadly speaking, these relationships can be categorized in one of two ways:

- ❖ **Capacity-building:** refers to the development of relationships within an organization or a team, and includes activities like canvassing for new volunteers and calling volunteers to invite them to a meeting. These tend to be closer relationships with more clearly defined roles and an expectation of specific actions over time, and have a tendency to be more hierarchical in

nature. Some of those actions could be running team meetings, organizing and running canvases or note taking.

- ❖ **Community-building:** refers to parallel relationships built with people outside of an organization or team, meaning no one has higher power over the other in the relationship. These are often looser connections with less of an expectation of explicit action, but can be mobilized at important moments to accomplish shared goals. Examples are working together on your action project with a justice-focussed club at your school, or relational meetings with a local co-op to discuss implementing a solar installation.

1.1 The Snowflake Model

Ultimately, whether it is through capacity-building, community-building, or more commonly, a combination of the two, the organizer's prime directive is to build relationships that are defined by shared purpose and serve their objective of building community power.

When this web of relationships is characterized by a distributed leadership network, meaning there is no vertical leadership structure, and exhibits exponential growth potential, due to the tendency of its members to be constantly forging new relationships, the community is transformed into a powerful constituency that has the potential to act and affect outcomes on behalf of its shared interest.

This is an example of the snowflake model, which is only one model of organizing:



The purpose of forging deep lasting relationships in your community is to create a community that looks like the snowflake model. In doing so, you are creating a powerful network of allies that will support each other in taking climate action even after your project is finished. This network can be built by having community meetings, which is the first step to forming relationships in organizing. There are a few steps you must take to building this snowflake model network: finding your people, reaching out to them, hosting meetings, and retaining the relationships over time.

2. Who are Your People?

The purpose of researching and finding what the community is already focused on is to find opportunities for problems and solutions within the community you are working in. Community meetings help find opportunities for a campaign or project, to learn who is working on relevant projects already, and to identify other people your team should talk to about potential campaigns! These people will be potential allies, so ensuring you keep an open and honest relationship with them is key.

These community meetings are an organizing tactic called *relational meetings*. If you need a guide to working with Indigenous Peoples as allies, check out the Reconciliation Guide section [Being an Ally](#).

2.1 Relational Meetings

The relational meeting, or “listening meeting” is an organizing tactic in which your primary objective is to deeply listen to your fellow constituents. It involves setting-up meetings with community leaders (ex: club leaders, school admin, or political figures), hearing their perspectives on the issues and challenges faced by that community, sharing your stories with one another, and exploring potential avenues for collaboration and partnership without pushing your agenda. In the context of your school, your relational meetings will ideally occur with a combination of people within your school community, and people that are experts in a specific field but not within the community. An example of this might be a climate solutions activist that has specific knowledge about your project, but doesn’t work or live within the community.

2.2 Brainstorm

→ USE WITH: [Deciding Who to Meet With](#)

Purpose:

- ❖ To guide your team in curating a list of people to have meetings with in the community.
- ❖ To explore different avenues in your community for a potential project.

Time: 40 mins - 1 hour

To brainstorm some people to begin talking to, think through these questions:

- ❖ Who are people with knowledge of and power in your community?
 - Who are leaders in the community? (school context: student leaders of other clubs, student council leaders, sport team captains, students with lead positions in arts programs; also, members of admin, relevant teachers, etc.)
 - What barriers are there in your community? Who might have knowledge about barriers facing parts of the community? This could include social, economic or environmental barriers.
 - Barriers could be anything you see as a barrier in your community. You understand your community best so that should be the most apparent to you as a group. For example, if you chose your school and the barrier is that many people don't care about climate change, reaching out to people in the community regarding that issue would be important to ensure the project goal is able to succeed. Once you dig deeper, maybe you realize that the reason people don't care is because they don't have time due to social or economic reasons, such as having multiple jobs or having to take care of younger siblings. This barrier is important to understand so that the project goal and strategy can tackle this issue directly and account for that problem throughout.
- ❖ Who are people with expert knowledge of climate action?
 - Who would have ideas of opportunities related to some climate solutions we've already discussed? (pick one contact from each "area": transportation, waste, buildings or community planning, energy sector or renewables, green businesses, etc.)
 - Who has knowledge about local climate solutions (e.g., urban planners, city staff and school board sustainability manager)?
- ❖ Who is outside of your sphere of environment or climate solutions?
- ❖ *Try to meet with a wide breadth of people as climate change is an increasingly intersectional issue and you should be trying to bridge that gap.*

- **Intersectional:** Is based on the interconnected nature of social justice issues, such as class, race, and gender, as overlapping with other systems of discrimination and or disadvantages. It takes into account peoples' complex and overlapping identifies and experiences in order to understand the complexity of problems they face.

3. How to Reach Out to Them?

→ USE WITH: [Relational Meetings Email Template](#)

Reaching out to a community leader can be intimidating, but it can be as simple as emailing them from the contact info you find on their website.

The process for relational meeting communications:

- ❖ Decide who to reach out to with your team, assign this as an action item.
- ❖ Find their information online, through their website or through someone you know.
- ❖ Contact them through email or phone.
 - It's usually best to contact them by email first, wait a week, and then attempt to phone them, if you still do not receive a response.
 - In the email, try and make it as personalized as possible and to give them some background information, and to ensure they know it's not a scam or copy-paste email.
 - You want them to *want* to meet with you and feel it is purposeful and meaningful to do so. Think: *why should* they meet with you? What will they get out of it?
 - Use the **email template** below as a guide.
 - In the original email, give some times or dates you can meet on to cut out the back-and-forth usually associated with scheduling a meeting.
- ❖ After deciding on a meeting time with them, schedule a meeting using Google Calendar and invite everyone who would like to attend.
 - Feel free to reach out to your team, through Slack or another way, to invite up to 2 *more people*. There should only ever be a **max of 3** team members at these meetings, as the agenda tends to be derailed and less personal the more people you add.
 - Add everyone who decides to come to the calendar event via email.
- ❖ **15 - 30 minutes** before the meeting, whether digital or in-person, meet with the other team members to talk through questions you would like to ask and to ensure everyone is on the same page. *Create a loose agenda, choose a*

facilitator and choose a notetaker and time keeper, if necessary and appropriate to do so.

- ❖ During the meeting, thank them for meeting with you, and make a plan for contacting them again. It can be something as simple as, “we are going to discuss this with the rest of our team next week, and next month we are deciding on a project to do. We will reach out to you again then.” or, “feel free to contact us if you have any questions or would like our help on X. We haven’t decided yet on a project, but we would like to keep in touch.”
- ❖ **Debrief the meeting** afterward with the other members of your team. This should be a quick check-in and deciding on any potential action items.
 - Ask: do we need to do any research coming out of this meeting? Who can reach out to the person they mentioned? When can that be done by? They mentioned X and that seemed like a great opportunity, what else might we need to know before bringing this to the team meeting next week?
 - Decide on who and how you will share the meeting notes with the team. Can this be through Slack or email or Google drive?

4. Having a Relational Meeting

4.1 General Rules to Follow

- ❖ Make sure to set a goal or outcome for the meeting beforehand with your team, so that you know exactly why you are having this meeting, and what you would like to get out of it.
- ❖ Give a brief description of the purpose and run through an agenda so everyone is on the same page before the meeting starts. Consider sharing your goal or outcome.
- ❖ Make sure to give all relevant background information about why you're doing your project, and what you've planned so far. Explain why you want to meet with this person specifically, and about what you're hoping to learn from them. The more context you give, the better the suggestions will be that the other person is able to give!
 - It can sometimes be challenging to explain your project to someone else, when you're really used to just talking about it with your team! It could be helpful to practice having informal conversations about your project before your relational meeting - for example, with your parents or friends.
- ❖ Respect the person you're meeting with as an 'expert'.
- ❖ Project confidence! Young people (and especially women and BIPOC) are socialized to doubt their knowledge and abilities; if you are meeting with someone who is in a position of power or authority over you, or even someone who you just perceive as more knowledgeable, you may instinctively undermine yourself when talking. However, the other person will respond to the level of confidence that you project: if you seem self-assured, they are more likely to believe that you know what you're talking about, and will be more willing to have a deeper conversation. Even if you don't feel fully confident about the project or conversation, it's important to try to "fake it until you make it".
- ❖ Share your stories of self with one another.
 - Try not to skip this section even if you are tight on time! Get to know each other on a more personal level as opposed to surface level. This

helps foster relationships and makes them more likely to become your ally and answer questions honestly and openly.

- ❖ Take comprehensive notes and take a moment to synthesize them after into the “meeting report” (a template for this report can be found below).
- ❖ Engage in open-ended conversations.
- ❖ Be respectful and mindful of boundaries.
 - Try to sense the room and someone’s body language, as people aren’t always comfortable responding to certain questions. Don’t shy away from difficult conversations or questions if it will help you understand your community better.
 - When talking to a decision maker, such as a politician, feel free to use deep, probing questions to get a straight answer if it seems they aren’t answering something directly.
- ❖ Listen actively, which requires everyone to fully concentrate, understand, respond and remember what is being said. Inquire with curiosity to make sure we understand one another when asking clarifying questions.
- ❖ Ask open-ended questions so you can hear others thoughts and opinions as opposed to leading them to a specific answer.
 - Open ended questions are questions that cannot be answered with a simple yes or no.
 - Example: Closed question - Do you feel this is a good climate solution?
Open ended question - What do you think about this climate solution?
- ❖ However, make sure that you are also responding to their responses! You should not just be reading out a list of questions, which will feel unnatural. You’ll only be able to draw out insightful answers from them if you follow up. See the meeting as a relationship building opportunity. When you’re making a new friend, you would never just ask the other person about themselves, you also need to share your thoughts!
- ❖ Speak from the “I” when offering your input and not assume your opinion to be more ‘correct’ than others. This will ensure you are not speaking for the entire team.
- ❖ Use a respectful tone when sharing your opinion and when in disagreement or dissent.

- ❖ Collectively pass discussions around with whoever is present and make sure everyone has a chance to weigh in.
- ❖ Explore shared purpose.
 - Explain the purpose of your team and the project you are working on.
 - Ask the person you're meeting with their purpose for their organization or work they are doing. Reflect after the meeting and discuss these questions with your team:
 - *Is this group the right fit to ally with?*
 - *Is our project/purpose something this group is interested in?*
- ❖ Build a relationship over time.
 - Building a relationship over time can look like a few things:
 - Ask if they need help with any actions.
 - Show up or carry out those actions when they ask for assistance.
 - Checking in to see if there are new developments with projects they are working on, or updating them on your team's activities. This can most likely be done over email.
 - Ask for assistance in return for your teams project.
 - Be aware of your team's capacity and boundaries when saying “yes” to anything they ask of you. This will ensure you don’t promise one thing and fail to follow through.
- ❖ Be internally critical of your own biases.
 - These community members may have different views than your own or your team. Make sure to actively listen to their points of view and avoid conflict when necessary. Do not act like an expert when this person explains their own point of view or opinion. Instead treat them like an expert on what they are expressing. Ask more questions to gain a better understanding of their position. This can give you key information for barriers or problems you may face when working in the community or on a specific project.
- ❖ Exchange, and keep track of emerging ideas. Your team should not be talking more than the person you are meeting.

- ❖ Assess potential avenues of collaboration or partnership, but don't commit to anything.
 - This ensures you do not commit to things that aren't discussed with the rest of the team, when your team may lack capacity or the decision making power to do so. These sorts of decisions need to be discussed and decided with a democratic vote. To commit prematurely will damage a relationship when expectations/commitments are not held.
- ❖ At the end of the discussion, ask them for recommendations on who to speak with next.
 - This will broaden the scope of people your team knows, and they may be willing to give you their contact information. This allows you to use their *snowflake model* and their community connections to help your team.

4.2 Safety During Meetings

Your safety is always, always, *always* the top priority. At all times, in all situations, it is better to be safe rather than stay in an unsafe situation to complete a task. This is especially important when meeting with community members or other people you do not know.

Safety rules you must follow:

1. NEVER have meetings alone, and whenever possible, have an adult chaperone waiting nearby (e.g., If you are meeting at a cafe, the chaperone could be sitting at another table enjoying their coffee while you have your meeting. If you are meeting in a park, the chaperone could be sitting nearby or going for a walk in the park while you have your meeting. If you are canvassing at houses, the chaperone could be waiting on the sidewalk while you canvas. Also, a chaperone could be waiting in the car or nearby the location you are meeting, in case of an emergency). Each relational meeting should also have 2 team members present but no more than 3, and whenever possible, an adult chaperone. Having too many people can make the meetings unproductive and awkward for the person you're meeting. Two to three is the magic number to ensure everyone feels safe and comfortable.
2. Have meetings digitally or in a public place. Do not have meetings in someone's private home or secluded places.

3. Ensure team members and family or friends know who you are meeting, where, and for how long.

We ask all team members to put their personal safety first. This means:

- ❖ **Not engaging in activities that make you feel unsafe** (e.g., going to a house with a dog while canvassing, or any areas that make you weirdly uncomfortable for no specific reason. There does not need to be a reason for you to be uncomfortable, if you are, just leave).
- ❖ **Leaving a situation immediately if you feel unsafe** (e.g., If someone is yelling at you while you are canvassing or talking, please remove yourself from the area along with your team member. Don't feel that just because you have a team responsibility that you need to stay in an unsafe situation).
- ❖ **Practice good judgement**, if there are red flags and you notice a change in behaviour in the person/people you are meeting (e.g., If someone starts asking personal and non-professional questions that are not related to the purpose of the meeting) and/or the situation (e.g., if the public place you are attending for a meeting is empty or closed, leave and schedule for another day and location) LEAVE immediately.
- ❖ **Never follow or go to a location not already agreed upon**, instead reschedule or cancel the meeting (e.g., If the person you are meeting decides to change the location without warning, don't go. If the person asks you at some point in the meeting to continue the meeting at another location, even if it is a public space, don't go. You don't know the circumstances of the place they want to take you to.).
- ❖ **Never give personal and identifiable information**, it is important never to give the community member personal information that could be used to harm you (e.g., your address, your parents' names, the location of your school or classrooms, and your age).
- ❖ **Always schedule meetings during the day**, when the sun is out and it is not dark (this includes sunset). NEVER meet anyone at night time, even if it is a public space.
- ❖ **Keeping an eye on your teammates**, and staying connected with them in case anyone runs into trouble (e.g., have other people's phone numbers, be aware of where your partner is if they go to the bathroom or answer a phone call, and always ensure you have a phone with a full battery charge).
- ❖ **Letting your mentor know immediately if you are made uncomfortable in any way**, including by teammates, staff, or participants of an event (e.g., someone is racist/sexist/homophobic/transphobic, uses language that is inappropriate, is harassing you, or is making you feel unwelcome in the

group). You can also contact us at any time if an incident has occurred. Our top priority is making everyone safe and welcome.

4.3 Running the Meeting

A brief flow and agenda for the meetings will be consistent regardless of the community member you are meeting with. It should look like this:

1. Meeting with any team members before the relational meeting to discuss questions you'd like to ask.
2. The relational meeting:
 - a. Introductions
 - b. Norms
 - i. Ask if it's okay to take notes. Explain that if they want something *off the record* they can say so. (*Off the record* is a political term that means they are confiding in you not to tell anyone else outside of that meeting. This is mostly used when meeting with politicians if they have information that is important but they might not be allowed to share publicly.)
 - c. Explain the purpose of the meeting. Give a brief overview of the agenda. Check in with the person you are meeting with to ensure they feel comfortable with this agenda.
 - d. Sharing story and purpose of team. Invite them to share theirs.
 - e. Explain how you are looking for a community project and would like their feedback and insight.
 - f. Ask them the list of questions you created with your team members. Allow conversation to flow naturally, and ask more questions based on their answers. Be curious about their responses, and ask more questions to clarify or understand their responses if you are confused.
 - i. Feel free to run idea's or area's of climate solutions you'd discussed as a team by them. Actively listen to their feedback.
 - ii. Ask what climate solutions they would like to see in the community.
 - iii. Ask about barriers the community faces. Is there a problem related to climate change they want to see solved?
 - g. Ask them if there is anyone they recommend you reach out to next. If they have connections to someone, ask if they can make email introductions or give you their contact information.

3. Debrief with team members after the meeting and together fill out the [relational meeting report template](#).

4.4 Relational Meeting Report

→ USE WITH: [Relational Meeting Report Template](#)

Purpose:

- ❖ To track and record thoughts, comments and key learnings after a relational meeting.

Outcome:

- ❖ A brief summary of the meeting to bring back to the team to debrief.

Time: 15 minutes

5. Networking

Networking is one way to foster and create new relationships with people in your community that you otherwise wouldn't meet. People tend to think meeting others and networking events are terrifying, but it is really just about making new friends! You don't need to be an expert on your project, community or climate change to build relationships. The more you model curiosity and collaborative attitudes that are non-hierarchical, the better. Since you want your relationships built on mutual benefit, everyone should be treated inclusively and equally. You might have to network at local community events, when you run a community table for club day at school, when you canvas outside in your neighborhood to collect signatures, etc.

You only need to do a few things to network effectively:

- ❖ Be yourself.
- ❖ Ask questions.
- ❖ Listen actively.
- ❖ Be a giver by helping others.

- ❖ Get their information, and give them yours.
- ❖ Follow up with them.



5.1 Networking Team Exercise

This exercise can be done within 10 minutes, and with a minimum of 10 people.

- ❖ Awkwardly interject yourself into the conversation with:
 - Didn't I see you at ___?
 - Hi, I just wanted to connect because...
 - Isn't this food delicious?
 - I love your shoes!
- ❖ Introduce yourself.
- ❖ Find common ground & make a connection.
- ❖ Ask for their contact info.
 - Input it into your phone.
 - Get their business card.
 - Take a picture of their business card with your phone.
- ❖ Make tentative plans for contacting them .

- ❖ Awkwardly extract yourself to go talk to someone else.
 - It was lovely to meet you, we'll chat soon!
 - I really want to go introduce myself to X before they leave.

Debrief how that went afterward for 5 minutes.

Answer:

- ❖ How did that feel?
- ❖ How did you interject yourself in conversation?
- ❖ How did you exit?
- ❖ What are some examples you can share with the group?
- ❖ What would you do differently next time?

6. Maintaining the Relationships

If you need a guide to working with Indigenous Peoples as allies, check out the Reconciliation Guide section [Being an Ally](#).

Maintaining the community relationships you have can be done in three very simple steps:

1. Building relationships through communication and sharing your stories with each other.
2. Offering help with any projects or campaigns they are working on.
3. Asking for help with your project.

How do you build relationships? [Watch this video for a quick idea of how to do this.](#)

- ❖ You can build them through relational meetings.
- ❖ Reinforcing connections over the long haul.
 - This can be as simple as a phone call or email to update them and ask for updates in return!
- ❖ Showing up when they ask and when you have said you would do something.