

# On One-to-Ones

*What are one-to-ones about? How can we learn to do them?*

A relationship is a living thing. It needs and benefits from the same attention to detail that an artist lavishes on his art.

—David Viscott

VIA IAN SIMMONS

*As it happened, we studied one-to-one meetings near the end of our course even though we now wish we could have begun our course by doing them with each other. As we found out, "one-to-ones" are about beginning and deepening relationships. In a one-to-one, two people meet and form the basis for a good public relationship. In a one-to-one, we share stories about our experience, discover interests in common, and make specific commitments to public action. A one-to-one is a tactic. When part of a broader strategy, facilitating one-to-ones can be vital to the work of an organizer. One-to-ones form public relationships that build communities for action in public life.*

## Why one-to-ones?

"Hardly a theorist, [Jack] knew from the relationship with [Professor] Copey that education was not a matter of requirements—it was more the magic of two individuals coming together in some ineffable manner and winging into uncharted realms.... Copeland's method was unique, for he was a man who, in Walter Lippmann's words, acted on the assumption that teaching is not the handing down of knowledge from a platform to an anonymous mass of note-takers, but that it is the personal encounter of two individuals."

—From *Romantic Revolutionary*, a biography of John Reed, a student at Harvard College circa 1910

I wanted to facilitate a week on one-to-ones

because I was frustrated. I was frustrated because I felt that there was a lot more I should learn about communication in face-to-face organizing situations. I felt that by learning about one-to-ones (1:1's), I might learn more helpful ways to approach such public relationships.

Indeed, one-to-ones are crucial to the work of many organizers we met with this semester, including Kris Rondeau of the Harvard Union of Clerical and Technical Workers, Marshall Ganz, and Julia Greene of St. Mark's Parish. As with other kinds of public leadership, we learn to facilitate one-to-ones best through lots of direct experience.

## What did we learn about one-to-ones?

From Julia, we learned a new way to define one-to-ones: *one-to-ones form public relationships that build communities for action in public life.*

What are the differences between most face-to-face conversations and one-to-ones?

We studied the differences between public and intimate encounters, especially as outlined by the campaign at St. Mark's parish, to help us understand the nature of one-to-ones.

### *A one-to-one is:*

- A public relationship.
- Probing (for learning about self-interest).
- Purposeful (intentional and part of a strategy).
- Scheduled (time, place, etc...).
- About commitments to specific actions.

### ***A one-to-one is not:***

- An intimate relationship.
- Prying (personal and not related to public self-interest)
- Chit-chat, free-flowing, without any agenda.
- Accidental.
- About vague commitments to action.

### **Reluctant, anyone?**

Over the course of the week in which we studied 1:1's we had many questions that signaled a certain uneasiness about doing 1:1's in practice.

#### *What if we are anxious?*

- Realize that engaging with other people can be stressful, disorienting, and even scary work.
- Know it is O.K. to be scared, regardless of experience. Everyone gets scared. Recognizing that you are nervous or anxious is the first step to knocking down and learning the skills you need to feel safe enough to do the work. [via Mary Hannah Henderson (MHH)]
- Practice. Trying out 1:1's with people who know what you are doing can give you the confidence to do them with others.

*What about cultural differences?* "For people of some cultures... doing one-to-one work is off-putting" (MHH)

- "Some cultural groups might prefer to engage in dialogues in small groups, following a paradigm more like house meetings." (MHH)
- "I was struck by how finding commonalities [through one-to-ones] allows cultural barriers to be broken down." (Judy Hung)

*What if I already have a relationship with the other person?* "It [can] be difficult to approach people you are already in a relationship with to do a one-to-one, because it sounds so stilted." (MHH)

- Be clear about the reasons you are meeting that person. It can help make the situation feel less awkward for both of you.

*What if I don't know the other person?* Indeed, you may know next-to-nothing about the person—or all you may know is that he or she is different from you. (MHH)

- Develop a system, a social ritual. Having a structure of some sort often makes people feel safer. Coming up with a framework in which to approach people may give us the security we need

to go out and do it. (MHH)

- Beginnings are big opportunities. "I think that the most successful 1:1's that I have been a part of occurred at the outset of projects or organizations... I think that doing 1:1's early in the game leaves much more room for the formation of new relationships." (Gian Pangaro)

*What about power differences in a 1:1?* "But I might be manipulating them."

- Mutuality is crucial, establishing the basis of a relationship. In successful 1:1's, both participants come to a better understanding of each other's interests. The initiator may learn of potential paths to work with the other person to build power they are both interested in. When possible, the other

### ***Key Lessons***

- In order to learn about one-to-ones:

- A) Do some. And then do a hundred more.
- B) Do them as a part of a group effort in a strategic campaign.
- C) Be upfront about the inevitable anxieties about doing one-to-ones.
- D) Have a system for evaluating them.

- Five issues about one-to-ones to keep in mind (via an e-mail from Marshall Ganz):
  - (1) they are *scary for everyone* because they require making oneself vulnerable to uncertainty, but are potentially very rewarding for the same reason;
  - (2) they are interactive, *based on mutuality*, getting at each others interests, and the deeper the interests, the stronger the energy;
  - (3) they are *intentional*—they are strategic, they have a goal and are, in this sense, not like a "friendship" (although they can become that), they are a public relationship;
  - (4) they *require commitment*—no commitment at the end (even if its just to meet again or have a coffee) means no relationship was built—but the commitment can be very limited and still be authentic: the important thing is to be clear;
  - (5) relational strategy requires a choice of how to *balance commonality and diversity*—the greater the commonality of interest around which they eventually form, the greater the diversity of resources they can engage.

person commits to a specific action along one or more of these paths. In other words, the other person sees you (your public self) as a means to accomplish his or her own goals and express his or her values. One-to-ones can be about finding ways to bring different kinds of power to bear for a common public purpose.

*What if you are having a 1:1 and someone shares with you something really personal and you are not sure how to respond?*

•Remember one-to-ones should be bounded—they are about professional manners, public rela-

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tionships, and public stories. Often, we share aspects of our personal lives through public stories. But these stories are ones that we are comfortable sharing in public, for public purposes. These stories are not about simply opening oneself before the world; rather, they are shared to make a point.

•When people share stories in ways that seem quite weird or confessional, it may be that there has been miscommunication. However, it could also be important information to take in—going on this data alone, you may not estimate this person to be ideal for a public relations team.

•How you respond is a judgement call, and judgement can be strengthened with preparation, practice, and evaluation.

### **How We Started Out: "Do Them"**

At a celebration a month before the week about 1:1's, I met an organizer named Stefan, who works in Chicago with the United Power campaign of the Industrial Areas Foundation. He mentioned he may do 30 1:1's in a single week. I asked him how our class could best learn about 1:1's. He replied with two words: "Do them."

Still, because of our course structure, we devoted much less time doing 1:1's during the whole semester than Stefan spends doing them in a typical week of organizing. In the end, we each did one or two, and up to six 1:1's for purposes of the course—just a tiny tip of the iceberg for organiz-

ers with Stefan's experience. We did have other resources besides time to draw on. Marshall referred me to Julia Greene, who is an organizer for St. Mark's in Dorchester.

At St Mark's, community organizing is done with 1:1's. In the past year, Julia and other members of St. Mark's did hundreds of one-to-ones. Every week, members of the community leadership team do a version of 1:1's with each other, as well as with people not yet on the leadership team. One Sunday I visited a gathering of the leadership team to learn more about 1:1's to prepare for our 1:1 week. Julia wrote a draft of a piece about the St. Mark's campaign and 1:1's which she e-mailed to us for comment. Marshall is teaching about 1:1's at the Kennedy School of Government (course PAL-177). I watched a video of the class on 1:1's. The video features the St. Mark's Community campaign, and shows Marshall and students trying out and discussing 1:1's.

Marshall also forwarded us an e-mail that Mary Hannah Henderson, and teaching fellow in PAL-177, wrote to her section on reluctance to do 1:1's.

Before the week of study, we all had significant experience in face-to-face meetings. However, few of us had done 1:1's according to the St Mark's criteria (for example, one feature of 1:1's we often missed out on was gaining a specific commitment to an action).

### **What did we do?**

As a part of our week studying 1:1's, we tried doing them with each other, and with people outside the course. The previous week, we drew names of another person in the class out of a hat. Sue also e-mailed the names of students in the Sociology 96 class with whom we were to do a 1:1. On Sunday, we were to write a response paper that addressed 1) A 1:1 you have been a part of; 2) What your experience with 1:1's as been/could be; 3) Julia's e-mail on the St. Mark's 1:1 campaign; and 4) A challenging self-posed question about 1:1's.

On the Tuesday class, we debriefed the 1:1's we had attempted, talked about the characteristics of 1:1's (including the St. Mark's criteria), and attempted a 1:1 "fishbowl" kind of exercise that Marshall had suggested. The rest of the class watched on as Kate and I tried a 1:1.

Julia Greene contributed as a special guest to

our Thursday class discussion.

### **How might have we learned more about 1:1's?**

- Do 1:1's earlier. By doing 1:1's earlier in the semester, we might have had the chance to practice them. We might have built a stronger relationships for the class by doing 1:1's earlier in the semester.
- Do more 1:1's.
- Offer an interpretation of what 1:1's are about earlier in the learning process.
- Have a more developed system and deeper purpose for the 1:1's.
- Increase facilitator preparation and experience with teaching 1:1's.

### **A Small Comfort for Anxiety**

"There is no insurmountable solitude. All paths lead to the same goal: to convey to others what we are. And we must pass through solitude and difficulty, isolation and silence, in order to reach forth to the enchanted place where we can dance our clumsy dance and sing our sorrowful song but in this dance or in this song are fulfilled the most ancient rites of our conscience in the awareness of being human and believing in a common destiny."

—Pablo Neruda, *In the Splendid City*

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