

# Relational Meeting Overview



*The following Relational Meeting Overview was writing by Dr. Jenny Whitcher, and incorporates collective writing from her work with the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), for use within the Iliff's Internship Seminar curriculum. You may find it a useful resource on how to meaningfully and effectively engage difference.*

Relational meetings are best understood as an art form and spiritual practice, rather than a science. The art of the relational meeting is developed through practice and critical reflection, rather than following a prescribed protocol such as in an interview. The goal is to develop a public relationship grounded in mutual respect and shared interests. Relational meetings are not: transactional, a sales pitch, nor manipulative. Instead, a relational meeting is motivated by genuine curiosity about other people, and seeks to understand the other person's interests, core values, and motivations in public life.

Institutions of all kinds rarely, if ever, teach relational skills. The absence of intentional formation around relational capacity has led to a skills deficit that regularly manifests in relational dysfunction within institutions, leading to unhealthy and ineffective institutions.

A relational meeting is a spiritual encounter:

One organized spirit going after another person's spirit for connection, confrontation and exchange of talent and energy... A good relational meeting wakes somebody up.

Ed Chambers

*Roots for Radicals* (2003, p.44)

A relational meeting is an opportunity to identify leaders:

I have always thought that what is needed is the development of people who are interested not in being leaders as much as in developing leadership in others.

Ella Baker

*I've Got the Light of Freedom* (2007, p. 93)

A relational meeting is a radical act of social justice and social change:

If we desire a society without discrimination, then we must not discriminate against anyone in the process of building this society. If we desire a society that is democratic, then democracy must become a means as well as an end. If we desire a society in which men are brothers, then we must act towards one another with brotherhood. If we can build such a society, then we would have achieved the ultimate goal of human freedom.

Bayard Rustin

A public letter to the children of Cleveland

December 3, 1969

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## Purpose:

- To explore the possibility of a public relationship
- An exercise in mutual discovery of shared values, histories, interests, hopes, and fears
- To learn about someone's gifts and talents, interests, vision, and motivations

## Skills & Gifts Needed:

- Genuine curiosity about other people, including those who are different from you
- Genuine love for others as they are— you are not judging, psychoanalyzing, providing pastoral care or counseling, preaching, or selling.
- The ability to actively and deeply listen to another person
- The capacity to ask meaningful questions that encourage the person to talk about what is most important to them
- Calculated vulnerability through the ability to appropriately and equitably share towards mutual vulnerability—don't let the other person dive deep while you skim the surface.

## Structure:

- Schedule the meeting:
  - Call or email to make an appointment: Consider what the best communication method is for the person
  - Give your credentials: Tell the person who you are, who you represent, and who referred you to talk to them
  - State your purpose: Why you want to meet with the person
  - Tell them what you want: 30-45 minutes of their time for a one-to-one conversation
  - Create the right setting: Schedule the meeting for an appropriate and comfortable setting for the other person (e.g.: their office, coffee shop, etc.)
- Start the relational meeting on time and by restating your credentials, purpose, and what you want
- Example questions to start a relational meeting (but don't write an interview protocol or script):
  - How long have they been in the area?
  - What do they see happening to individuals and families in the community? What are the pressures? What are the signs of vitality and hope?
  - How long and in what capacities have they been involved in the congregation, organization, or institution?
  - Why did they get involved? Why do they stay involved?
  - Why...? Can you give me an example to illustrate?
- Once you get started, move beyond these opening questions and listen for stories that tell you what is important to the person: What motivates them? What do they value, and why? What worries them or is a pressure in their life? What makes them angry? What makes them hopeful?
- At midpoint in the meeting, ask yourself: Is this person sharing their story with me and am I finding out what they care about? If not, model what you are looking for by sharing a story and see if they respond in kind.
- Wrap up the relational meeting by:
  - Seeing if they have any questions

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- End the meeting in response to their interest. (e.g.: Don't ask for anything unless they indicate they are interested in finding out more, getting more involved, etc. Then make an invitation based on their interests—not yours)
- Asking who else they recommend you talk to
- Ask to schedule a follow-up meeting if this meeting went well and you are interested in building a public relationship with this person
- Ending the meeting early if it is not going well. The person may not be interested, you did not connect, or the meeting simply didn't go well. End the meeting, thank them for their time, evaluate your performance, learn from evaluation, keep practicing, and move on.
- After the meeting, write down your reflections using the [Relational Meeting Summary Form](#).

## Guidelines:

1. Probe, but don't pry—respect the other person's space and privacy
2. Keep the meeting focused, and be person- and story-centered
3. It is not just what the other person says, but how they say it, how they act, and what they don't say that conveys the fuller story
4. While people may be forced by the task (mobilizing), they are moved by relationship (organizing). In building a relationship, don't force a task-oriented response. Let the other person determine their response.