

Organising to Win

A guide to one-to-one organising conversations and handling objections



Building a strong union at work should be a priority for every UNISON activist. The best way to do this is to get your colleagues involved too. But how do you do that, especially when it feels like no one else wants to get involved or doesn't have the time to help? This guide will help you learn how to build the union through organising conversations.

What is an organising conversation?

Organising conversations are structured, one-to-one conversations with colleagues to build a relationship and inspire them to get involved (or more involved) in the union generally or in a particular union action or activity.

What are the general principles of holding a good organising conversation?

Start where people are at and find out what matters to them

- If we talk at members about what the union is doing or wants to do, people who are not already engaged in the union are likely to switch off.
- But if we start by *asking them* what issues are affecting them at work, they will talk to us.

The 70/30 rule

- Aim to keep the other person engaged by listening for around 70% of the time and talking for just 30% of the time.

Ask open questions

- After some initial small talk to warm up, use open questions which invite long answers, rather than closed questions which invite yes/no answers.
- Some good examples of this could include: "Has work got better or worse in recent years ... Why is that?" "If you could change one thing at work, what would it be?" "When and how did this start?", "Why do you think this is happening?", "How is this making you feel?"

Empathy and active listening

Show that you care about their response with empathy and active listening. Good eye contact, small nods of acknowledgement, open body language and relevant follow-up questions all build trust and show that you are engaged.

Emphasise their involvement. Members are the union.

- Try to avoid speaking in a way that describes the union as separate and external to the workforce and members as passive service recipients- ie "the union will do this for you". Emphasise that their involvement is the key to solving their problem. "if you stand

alongside your colleagues, you can win this”.

Take people on an emotional journey

- The most persuasive way to have a conversation is to take people on the journey of: (1) Anger, (2) Hope, (3) Action.

Anger, Hope, Action

Anger: Allow them to express the issues they care about and give them an outlet for frustrations that they might rarely get to air.

Hope: From there, you can start to give people hope of how this can change.

Action: Once someone feels hopeful you help them get involved, taking that first step towards making change happen.

Be prepared

Every organising conversation should have a clear objective and you should have in mind an action that you want your colleague to take (eg join the union, sign a petition, attend a meeting, etc.). The goal is to convince someone that it is vital they take this action.

You can do this by following this six-step organising conversation:

1. Introduction
2. Issues and agitation
3. Vision and education
4. Make an ask
5. Inoculation (where we expect employer hostility)
6. Action

1

Introduction – introduce yourself, develop rapport, set the context for the conversation.

2

Try to **identify** issues of concern and **agitate** around them. Give your colleague room for **ANGER**. Find out what matters to them and the extent to which workplace issues impact on their lives. Don't assume you know their issues and don't agitate around issues they have not identified themselves.

Use a good starter question

- How are you feeling about work at the moment?
- If you could change anything about work, what would it be?

Use agitational questions to encourage your colleague to reflect on how unfair the situation is.

- Has it got better or worse in recent years?
- How has that affected you and your family?
- What impact is that having on service users?
- Do you think that's fair?

Explore who is responsible for the issue and how individual attempts to address issues are often ignored

- Why do you think this is happening?
- Whose fault is it that things are like this? Why? What do they get out of it?
- Who has the power to change this?
- Do you think you could fix this by asking management yourself?
- What excuses do you think they'll give for why it can't be done?

3

Offer your colleague **HOPE** that there is a UNISON solution to their issue. Your aim is to communicate the 'plan to win'. Outline how UNISON members can come together to successfully address the issue through strength in numbers and wider union support. At the same time find out as much as you can about their workplace to factor into the plan.

Find out what they want

- What do you think would be a fair outcome? How would you like things to end up?

Explore the strength of a collective, union response

- Are you the only person suffering from this issue? Or are lots of others affected?
- Would they take a big group of you more seriously than just one person?
- What could you do together to pressure the employer to change this?
- Is there anything even stronger you could do that they couldn't ignore?

Explain that having more power by standing together is the foundation of the union

- Give examples of previous UNISON wins.

Reassure them

- You are not alone.
- I've been speaking to other staff and many people share this concern.
- We've decided enough is enough.

Share the plan to win

- For example – get every department involved, launch the campaign when 50% of workers are signed up etc. The plan to win must be credible. Must build sufficient power to influence and persuade the employer or other relevant decision maker and must have the confidence of members if it is to be successful (see separate 5 Phase Plan Guide).

Start mapping the workplace

Who else works in your department/on your shift?

- Names, job role
- Who do people go to when they have a problem/who do they trust?
- Who would be the best colleague at bringing everyone together?
- Who's already networked in the workplace?

4

Make an ask

Are they prepared to take a small action towards helping to resolve the issues they raised in step two?

Make a concrete ask

You've talked about how the issue affects you and we've discussed a solution...

- Will you join the union?
- Will you come to/bring others to a meeting?
- Will you ask colleagues to sign the petition?
- Will you help distribute campaign materials?

If they're not sure, encourage them to reflect on their options:

- "If you and your colleagues get involved, we can change this. But if you don't, what do you think will happen?" (The problem will continue. Probably get worse.)

It can be uncomfortable, but it's honest. Ultimately it is their choice. Don't fill the "awkward silence" while waiting on their response. Give them time to reflect and reach their own conclusion.

Your colleague may have doubts. If that's the case, use: Affirm, Answer, Re-direct.

Affirm

Acknowledge their objection is real. Show empathy and understanding ('I understand what you're saying')

Answer

Respond to the specific doubt or objection.

Re-direct

Steer the conversation back to the issue they identified in step 2. Allow them to return to their anger and then repeat the ask ('you told me you want to change [issue]. If we don't stand up, it will stay the same').

5

Many employers recognise UNISON, work in partnership, and provide a safe space for union membership and organisation. But some don't. Or some previously co-operative employers may become more hostile in response to an increase in union activity. If there is any risk of a hostile response from the employer then you should prepare your colleague through **inoculation**. This helps them pre-empt negative responses from managers and prepares them to not be scared by anti-union tactics from their employer.

Ask them how they think their manager/employer will respond.

How do they think management will react as we increase UNISON activity? What do you think they will do?

Warn them about the kinds of things they might hear.

You'll hear management say... eg "You've no chance winning that, stop causing trouble". "We're definitely going to resolve this, just waiting on next years' budget, be patient", "we are going to have some staff one to one meetings so we can address concerns directly"

Explain how management uses these tactics and words to demoralise and divide workers.

Particularly when they worry about the union getting stronger. Explain that the campaign or activity aims to shift the balance of power, and management will want to prevent this. Encourage them to recognise these tactics and remain strong and united.

6

Agree and confirm one small **action** for your colleague to do in support of the union or campaign. Initially a small ask. Set them up to succeed. eg attend a meeting, ask a specific colleague to join UNISON, get three colleagues to sign a petition.

Set the timescale for when they will do this by and arrange how best to keep in touch.

Follow up with them to see how their task went. Congratulate them on the steps they've already taken. Ensure they feel valued. Think about next steps to keep them engaged and involved and to gradually develop skill and commitment.

Some extra advice

You need time and space for you and your colleague to talk openly. If your employer is hostile to the union, this might need some planning. Plan to meet somewhere they will feel relaxed enough to speak openly. This could be a quiet area in or around your workplace, or somewhere away from your workplace, such as a café.

Face-to-face conversations are the most effective way to help your colleague feel relaxed, allowing them to be open about workplace issues they are facing, and the impact it is having on them. However, with the recent rise in home-working and hybrid-working, you may need to have the conversation online, such as Zoom. Plan this with your colleague, arranging a time and online meeting platform that is most convenient for them.

Reflecting on the six-step conversation

Good organising conversations take practice and improve with experience. Reflection is a really important part of developing organising skills. When you next have organising conversations, take a moment to think about:

- How did the conversation go?
- How did each step go?
- What did you learn?
- What would you do differently?

Objection handling

What is objection handling?

When having an organising conversation with a colleague, they may have concerns about becoming involved in the union, or may clearly be against it. Objection handling is a technique that you can use to address their concerns and objections and seek to continue the organising conversation.

This resource provides a structure for objection handling, as well as examples of it in practice. This structure is: affirm, answer, and re-direct.

Goal of the organiser	Things to say to the person being asked to join/take action
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1 AFFIRM

Acknowledge the concern as real and empathise.

“I understand what you are saying, I myself can understand because___”

“I know this can be a real worry...”

2 ANSWER

EXPLAIN a credible answer to the person with doubt or objections

Examples:

Cost of union membership:

Without union membership we are on our own and there is no way we can win. With membership we can stand strong together, and you know you’ll never face a problem at work alone. In time, the benefits of UNISON membership will outweigh the costs Without membership nothing will change.

Fear of consequences: “having fear is normal when we don't have any power. But there’s safety in numbers. That’s the point. We can’t just leave the employer with all the power to do what they want, and we keep suffering the consequences. Enough is enough and if we stick together, we can win this.

“I can get the benefits without being involved”: “to have a strong union, we need to all be in this together. Choosing not to join, weakens the union. You won’t get the benefits if we don’t have the power to win”

“I don’t like unions”: “ UNISON is a democratic, member led union of public service workers joining together to defend and further our interests at work . We are members sticking up for ourselves, each other, and the public services we provide. What’s not to like?”

3 RE-DIRECT

Re-direct the conversation to the key issue of the person

“You told me you really wanted a change (insert their key issue). You said the current conditions are unacceptable. You agreed that if you and your colleagues get involved, we can change this. But if you don’t, what do you think will happen? The problem will continue. Probably get worse. Are you OK with that...? Or are you ready to get involved/ join UNISON/do this small task so we can win this change?”

How many times should I use objection handling in an organising conversation?

A colleague may raise the same objection multiple times or have numerous different objections. Each conversation will vary, but it is recommended that you respond using this structure up to three times (with different 'answers' each time) before accepting they are just not ready to get involved.

Summary

1-1 conversations are the building blocks of a strong and organised workplace union.

Every Organising conversation should have a clear objective. They are structured, one-to-one conversations with colleagues to build a relationship and inspire them to get involved (or more involved) in the union generally or in a particular union action or activity.

Successful organising conversations require practiced skills such as open questions and active listening.

Anger – Hope - Action is an effective technique to encourage member participation.

The six steps of an organising conversation are:

- Introduction
- Issues and agitation
- Vision and education
- Make an ask
- Inoculation
- Action

Affirm, Answer, Redirect is an effective technique for responding to objections.

Organising to Win resources

Ultimately all organising is a set of tools and techniques deployed to shift the balance of power in favour of our members. How those tools are deployed will vary in different circumstances but generally the fundamentals remain the same.

Our Organising to Win webinars and resource library provide a growing set of organising guides including:

- Organising conversations
- Leader identification and activist recruitment
- Workplace mapping and charting
- The organising and equality impact assessment template and guide
- The five phase plan to win template and guide (Strategic organising)

This guide is one of many key organising resources in the Organising to Win series. UNISON activists and staff can access all resources at:

The Organising Space

UNISON's online platform for activists. Visit the Organising to Win tile at organisingspace.unison.org.uk

Pearl

The UNISON staff intranet. Visit the Organising to Win page.

Had an organising win?

Send a summary of it to win@unison.co.uk