

Icebreakers

(<http://adulthood.about.com/cs/icebreakers/>)

The Encyclopedia of Icebreakers (University Associates, 1983) says that icebreakers "are tools that enable the group leader to foster interaction, stimulate creative thinking, challenge basic assumptions, illustrate new concepts, and introduce specific material." As such, icebreakers can be used nearly any time a facilitator has a need to gather a group, get them together, and help them move forward. Energizers can be used to the same ends, and are generally thought of as best for points in the midst of a meeting, training, workshop, or other group learning experience

The Use of Icebreakers

Although the following points can easily be overdone, it is wise to consider a few basic elements before choosing (or inventing) and using Icebreakers.

Contracting

First, icebreakers tend to work best when participants have contracted around their participation in the activity chosen by the trainer. Contracting involves giving participants:

1. The rationale for the activity.
2. The objectives of the activity.
3. The structure of the activity.
4. The opportunity to ask questions.
5. The permission to participate at their own level of comfort.

This last point is critical, and is often missed. A single, prominent, announcement at the beginning of a training program (the point at which icebreakers are used!) will often suffice for making the point that participants are not "bound" to participation in every activity. Although this approach may run counter to events where facilitators hope for 100% participation, a bit of explanation may help.

Although participants will not always verbalize concerns to facilitator(s), any given training activity can place undue stress on people for a variety of reasons. Be it the deeply introverted person who is placed in their least resourceful state in high-energy group activities; the person in perpetual physical pain who avoids going "inside" themselves for reasons of pain management; the person with painful memories of a childhood filled with concerns about their physical ability; or, simply, the person who is simply having "a bad day," participants vary in their degree of comfort with icebreakers and energizers. When they perceive a poor fit between their state of mind and the requirements of the icebreaker, people will either publicly or privately "opt out" of participation. When given the freedom to choose, people tend to take greater ownership of their participation and are less able to claim "they made me do it." Ironically, when given choice, the vast majority of people will choose participation over either public or private opting out.

To maximize genuine participation in icebreakers, it is best to formally state that people have the right to "pass" at any point. When given the explicit option, participants only rarely "opt out."

Appropriateness

Tone

Icebreakers "set the tone" for some aspect(s) of the event they proceed. Given this, it makes sense to choose an icebreaker that is consonant with this tone. Sometimes "more serious" icebreakers inadvertently send a message that "there will be no fun here!" At other times, "silly" icebreakers can have unintended impacts

with a particular audience, or provide just the right break at the start of a multi-session program or when used as an energizer. Generally, then, it makes sense to be deliberate in your choice of icebreakers.

Length

Some of the icebreakers in this compilation are best for very short programs, while others make most sense when used in programs that last for several days. As a rough rule-of-thumb, an icebreaker that lasts more than 1/16th of the total time for a program (a half-hour in an eight-hour day, for example) is probably too long (unless, of course, the icebreaker provides in-depth learning experiences that are integral to the entire program).

Teaching Points

Some trainers and facilitators prefer to use icebreakers that contain significant learning's that are part of the overall learning objectives of the programs. Others prefer to use icebreakers that avoid relationship to the program's learning points. Likely best is the realization that icebreakers are dynamic and provide intended, and unintended, learning's. A consideration of these potential learning's, prior to the facilitation of any particular icebreaker, can help you optimize contracting and process learning experiences.

Processing Learning's

Again, trainers differ on the degree to which they prefer to use icebreakers and energizers as teaching opportunities. In general, given the "1/16th" rule-of-thumb (above), detailed processing of icebreakers can disrupt the momentum generated by the application of the icebreaker itself.

Safety

Apart from the type of "psychological safety" described above (under "Contracting"), icebreakers and energizers that require complicated or challenging physical exertion should be considered carefully prior to execution. Again, though we may carry the attitude of "no one has to participate," such an attitude has little beneficial impact if not shared publicly with participants.

Examples:

Names & Stories

Ask participants to introduce themselves; with each person talking briefly about the most ridiculous thing they've done in their working life.

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Facilitating Introductions:

Help participants relax and get to know each other

When participants are meeting for the first time, start with an icebreaker that helps everyone to learn names and personal/professional information. If you are facilitating more than one session, choose a few icebreakers -- you can use one to get people chatting and exchanging personal information, another to help memorize or review names, and another at a stretch break.

The icebreakers "Everyone's a Liar" and "What's the Question?" are fun games for exchanging personal information. Both can be used even if participants already know each other. "Alliterative Introductions"

and "Name Chain" help participants to memorize names. "Seating Plan" requires movement and can be used to enliven a tired group.

Everyone's a Liar

1. Facilitator writes three statements on the board. Two statements are true, and one is a lie. Example:

*I have been teaching for 10 years.
I have a pet newt called, "Isaac Newt."
I lived in Switzerland for a year.*

2. Participants ask "lie detector" questions to get further information, in order to determine which statement is false.

Teaching - Where have you taught? What have you taught? What year did you start?

Pet - How old is Isaac Newt? What does Isaac eat? Where do you keep Isaac?

Switzerland - Where did you live in Switzerland? What language was spoken in that part of Switzerland?

3. Participants vote on which statement is a lie. Reveal which are truths and which are lies.
4. Place participants in small groups (3 or 4 works well). Small groups repeat steps 1 - 3.
5. Have participants introduce each other to the large group.

What's the Question?

1. Facilitator writes some facts on the board. Example:

*purple
16 months
Japan*

2. Participants try to find the question that matches each fact.

Purple - What's your favorite color? What color is your car? What color are your toenails?

16 months - How long have you lived in this city? How old is your child? How long have you been married?

Japan - Where were you born? Where have you worked? Where are you going on vacation?

3. When participants have discovered all of the questions, place them in small groups (3 - 4). Repeat 1 and 2.

4. Have participants introduce each other to the large group.

Alliterative Introductions

1. Introduce yourself to the group with an alliterative sentence based upon the first letter of your name. Example:

*"I'm kooky Katherine. I like kissing kittens."
(Pattern: I'm ADJECTIVE NAME. I like ACTION-ing NOUN)*

2. Participants introduce themselves to the group with alliterative sentences.

*"I'm vivacious Vesna. I like volunteering vodka."
"I'm generous George. I like giving gifts."*

Name Chain

You can play "Name Chain" as a follow-up to "Alliterative Introductions."

1. Introduce yourself, and the person to your right.

I'm kooky Katherine. This is vivacious Vesna.

2. The person to your right repeats previous introductions, and introduces the person to their right.

She's kooky Katherine. I'm vivacious Vesna. He's generous George.

3. Continue with the next person to the right, until all names have been repeated.
4. Challenge volunteers to rhyme off all names quickly!

This game can be repeated for a few days, moving around the group to the left, or in random order, until participants have memorized each other's names.

The Top 10 Icebreakers for Meetings and Training Seminars

(<http://topten.org/content/tt.AU20.htm>)

Whether it is a small gathering at your home or a large training seminar, we all want to feel that we have established some commonality with our fellow attendees. By creating a warm, friendly, personal learning environment, the attendees will participate more and learn more!

1. Favorite T-shirt -

Ask attendees to bring (not wear) their favorite T-shirt to the meeting. Once all participants have arrived, ask each person to show the shirt to the group and explain how the T-shirt best resembles their personality.

2. Personal Bingo -

The host will need to do a little homework before the meeting to find out a few tidbits about each participant (favorite hobbies, books, vacation spots, number of children, favorite foods, etc). Prepare a bingo card (duplicate the card for all attendees to have the same one) with one tid-bit for each square, and instruct the participants to mingle with the group to identify the person for each square. As the information is uncovered, they ask the participant to sign their corresponding square. Keep moving among the guests until all squares are filled. Rules: only open-ended questions may be used. First person who fills card wins a prize.

3. Say cheese, please -

As each participant arrives, take their picture with a Polaroid type camera and hang their photo on a piece of easel paper in the entrance area of the meeting room in groups of two or three photos (depending on size of meeting - you may have only 2 per group or more if the group is large). Use your creativity and decorate the easel paper to extend a Warm Welcome and set the tone of the meeting. Once all participants have arrived, ask them to find their partner(s) from the photo display on the easel and spend about 5 - 10 minutes getting to know the person(s). Then have them introduce their partner(s) to the rest of the group and share something they discovered they have in common.

4. Famous people/cities -

As each participant arrives, tape a 3 x 5 index card on his or her back with the name of a famous person or city. They must circulate in the room and ask questions that can ONLY be answered with a YES or NO to identify clues that will help them find out the name of the person or city on their index card. EXAMPLES: Paris, Madonna, Santa Claus, John Wayne, and Casablanca

5. Sensuous Sam & Inquiring Ida -

Ask each participant to choose an adjective that begins with the first letter of their first name and one that really matches their personality. Have them introduce themselves just as they wrote it on the card and allow time for others to ask questions.

6. Dream Vacation -

Ask participants to introduce themselves and describe details of the ideal, perfect dream vacation.

7. Favorite animal -

As the guests arrive, and before you write their names on a name card, ask them to tell you their favorite animal and three adjectives to describe the animal. As they tell you, write the three adjectives on a nametag BEFORE their name (omit the name of the animal). Ask them to mingle with the crowd, sharing why these adjectives best describe their own personality. EXAMPLES: Loyal, cuddly, playful Dan

8. Birthday Partner -

Have participants mingle in the group and identify the person whose birth date (not year - just month and date) is closest to their own. Find out two things they have in common.

9. Long lost relative -

As a group, 1) ask each person to turn to the person on their right and greet him/her as if they really didn't want to be there. Yeah, you know what I mean - you can't wait to get out of there! Then everyone (simultaneously to create lots of fun and excitement) turn to the same person and greet him/her as if (s)he is a long lost, deeply loved relative who has just returned home and you're about to see the person for the first time in years! In fact, you thought you may never see this person again until this very moment. Okay, now ask everyone (again simultaneously) to turn to the same person and greet him/her as if this person just told you that you won the state lottery for 50 million dollars and you have the ONLY winning ticket!

10. Circle of Friends -

This is a great greeting and departure for a large group who will be attending a seminar for more than one day together and the chances of meeting everyone in the room is almost impossible. Form two large circles (or simply form two lines side by side), one inside the other and have the people in the inside circle face the people in the outside circle. Ask the circles to take one step in the opposite directions, allowing them to meet each new person as the circle continues to move very slowly. If lines are formed, they simply keep the line moving very slowly, as they introduce themselves.