

Icebreakers for Training, Meetings, and Other Events

Icebreakers serve many functions: to "warm up" the group; get the members involved with one another; get the members communicating with each other in an informal way; and get members' brains "back into action" or rejuvenated after breaks or meals.

A food icebreaker should meet the following criteria:

- Minimal time: take an average of 5 to 20 minutes to complete
- Active: require all attendees to participate as active members of the group
- Creative: require members to solve a problem, answer a question, perform mental or physical gymnastics, etc.
- Simple to implement: don't require prior substantive knowledge, or a lot of setup, materials or supplies

When to Use Icebreakers

The best times to use icebreakers are the following:

- Pre-event socializers: when the group is meeting for the first time, to get members to meet and become acquainted with one another--social warm-ups
- Morning openers: to get an event off to a positive (and fun) start, to stress the values of the group--openness, candor, friendliness, support, etc.
- After lunch wakeups: to help the group transition back into the meeting/learning environment
- Rejuvenation energizers: when the group is fading, getting bored, or overloaded with information
- Calming dissension or tension relievers: when the group seems to be coming apart at the seams, break the stress

Things to Consider When Choosing Types of Icebreakers

- How much time you have: most icebreakers are short but some may require more time; reporting out and discussing the lessons learned adds to the time
- Size of the group: some icebreakers work best in small groups; others require more people

- Room setup: the size and format of the room may influence which icebreakers you use. For example, a room set up in a boardroom style limits movement versus a large ballroom set up in rounds
- Need for supplies/materials: make sure you have what you need—paper, flipcharts, tape, 3x5 cards, etc. Make sure the venue allows you to pin/tape charts/signs to the wall
- Small prizes: people like to “win” and get recognized with small prizes

Icebreaker Examples

1. Change is Hard and Often Uncomfortable

Use some small and quick physical examples:

Take out your note pad and move pen to opposite hand (right handed people put pen in left hand). Now sign your name; write your street address and city.

Ask people with sport coats on to stand up and take off coat. Now put it back on with the opposite hand first (right handed people put the left hand through the sleeve first).

Lesson: Change often requires us to give up our old, comfortable habits and ways of doing things.

2. Social Warm-up: Who’s Here?

This icebreaker requires about 20-30 minutes of free meeting time before the event begins. It is a good social event to help members become acquainted with one another. It is best to do this during a casual registration period when members are checking in and picking up their training materials. Everyone needs to be located in the meeting room or lobby, hopefully enjoying pre-event refreshments. Hand out the below checklist and tell members that the person who obtains the most names on his or her list wins a prize.

Welcome to the _____ (event). This checklist will help you to meet the other members. You need to approach someone, introduce yourself, and ask them if they fit any of the items on your list. If they do, write down their name. You can only write down each person’s name once. When someone matches an item on your list and you have written down their name, move on to another person. The member who has recorded the most names, wins a prize.

Checklist for Members in this Group

Oldest child _____

Youngest child _____

- Middle child _____
- Owens a dog _____
- Owens a cat _____
- Has more than two children _____
- Loves the Star Wars movies _____
- Has more than two cars _____
- Lives in the city _____
- Has traveled to Asia _____
- Has traveled to Europe _____
- Has traveled to South America _____
- Has taken a cruise _____
- Loves to read books _____
- Plays tennis _____
- Loves football _____
- Drives a pickup truck _____
- Drives a sports car _____
- Loves to camp _____
- Loves to ski _____
- Speaks a second language _____
- Hates brussel sprouts _____
- Plays a musical instrument _____
- ADD TO THIS LIST _____

3. Social Warm-up—Duo Interviews

This warm-up works best at the beginning of an event with people who don't really know one another. It takes about 15-30 minutes, depending on the size of the group (works best with 20 or fewer). The exercise helps create a friendly atmosphere for the event. For this warm-up, the facilitator asks group members to pair up (may need to assign pairs); they may also need to move to different seats in the room to create space between pairs.

Each pair is to spend five minutes interviewing each other, learning such things as name, background, academic history, family information, favorite interests/hobbies, what makes the person unique, interesting anecdotes about their life/work, one thing that very few people know, etc. At the end of the time limit, each person will be asked to introduce their "new friend."

4. Celebrate the Success of the Event

During the registration and at key stages of the event, have a staff person take digital photos of all group members in various stages—at work, at play, etc. Put these photos into a quick slide show. Toward the end of the event, take 5-10 minutes to show the photos to the group.

The point: "This is how hard we have worked!" "This is how we enjoyed ourselves." "This is how we made new friends."

This history of accomplishments makes people feel good about their efforts and accomplishments.

5. Team Commercial

Each team attending the training is given 10 minutes to reach consensus on developing a 30 second "team commercial." This commercial or advertisement will tell the rest of the group about the team—interesting things about where the team comes from (state, city), unique aspects about a program that the team's office has developed, key aspirations that the team has about developing a new program, etc. The idea is to say things that will educate and encourage others to visit your jurisdiction or use your program. "Why would someone want to visit_____ to work with you?"

Teams can write ideas on flipchart paper. One person from the team should facilitate; another should record ideas; another should present the "commercial" (or alternatively, the team can present it). Presentation formats can include singing, rap, rhymes, or anything creative. The training facilitator will go around the room and allow each team to present. After all the presentations, the group will vote on the winner by applauding. The winners get a prize.

6. Team Bumper Sticker

A variation of the above exercise is that the team product is a “bumper sticker,” a short slogan (5-9 words or so) about the team, jurisdiction or program; or what the team will do after the training when they get back home.

Facilitator shows slide on “Chicago Bumper Stickers.”

7. Complete the Thought

This exercise helps group members get acquainted with each other by sharing their thoughts about certain things. The exercise will emphasize personal interaction. Each member takes out a pen and paper. The facilitator tells the group that she is going to read several incomplete statements and each member should complete the thoughts in their own words. After all statements are recorded, members will exchange papers with other teams. Teams will then meet and decide to read the statements that they consider the most interesting. Depending on the time, the entire group may or may not spend a few minutes in open discussion about the statements.

Some sample statements are:

The main reason I am here is _____

I think my best quality is _____

A pet peeve of mine is _____

I like working with people who are _____

I would like to learn _____

The kind of technology that we need in our office is _____

Training sessions like this are usually _____

8. Observation Skills

This exercise tests the members’ powers of observation for details. Ask members to pair off and face each other. Ask each person to speak for 30 seconds about something in their personal lives—children, spouse, pets, cars, home, golf game (or lack thereof), etc. After both pairs have spoken about their lives, ask them to move at least five feet away from one another and each face an opposite wall. The facilitator will then take turns asking a random selection of persons to describe (1) the color of the other person’s shoes; (2) the color of their eyes; (3) whether they had on any jewelry—what type; (color of their belt; (4) color of blouse or shirt, etc. This exercise stresses the importance of being observant while another talks; how it is difficult to be observant when we are talking.

9. Newspaper Shuffle

This is a quick moving and fun team exercise. The facilitator needs to bring in one local daily newspaper for each team. The pages of the newspaper should be completely out of order. Team members should be sitting or standing at a round table. The game requires them to put all the pages and sections in order. The team to finish first wins a prize. The exercise stresses teamwork and cooperation.

10. Speaking with Disruptions

This exercise asks group members to give impromptu speeches while fellow group members cause distractions. This exercise should be done later in training when the members know each other somewhat. The facilitator needs to prepare two sets of 3x5 cards: speeches (white cards) and disruptions (yellow cards—like fouls in soccer). The cards should be distributed at random face down throughout the room. Some of the yellow cards also include props (whistle, bell, horn). The facilitator instructs members to turn their cards over and read them. Members must follow the instructions on the cards.

The card instructions are as follows:

White cards:

You are first to speak. Go to the front of the room and speak for one minute about your favorite car.

You are second to speak. Go to the front of the room and speak for one minute about your favorite sport.

You are third to speak. Go to the front of the room and speak for one minute about your favorite celebrity.

You are fourth to speak. Go to the front of the room and speak for one minute about your favorite food.

You are fifth to speak. Go to the front of the room and speak for one minute about your favorite person in history.

Yellow cards:

When someone speaks about cars, after 30 seconds stand up and yell—“So what” two times; pause 5 seconds, and then yell “I don’t think so” two times; finally, pause 5 seconds and then yell “Who cares?”

When someone speaks about a sport, after 30 seconds, stand up, clap as loud as you can, and say twice very loudly “Yes, cool beans!” Pause for 10 seconds and then sing out “Oh, what a beautiful morning. Oh, what a beautiful day. Everything’s coming up roses. Everything’s going my way.”

When someone speaks about a celebrity, after 30 seconds, stand up and blow your whistle very loudly three times; pause 10 seconds and walk to the side of the room and blow it again three times.

When someone speaks about food, after 30 seconds stand up and ring your bell loudly three times; pause 10 seconds and walk ten feet to your right and ring it again three times.

When someone speaks about a historical figure, stand up and start walking slowly around the outside of the tables; every 10 seconds yell one of the following in order very loudly (e.g., in 10 seconds, yell #1; 10 seconds later, yell #2, etc.) (1) "History repeats itself!" (2) "We are doomed to relive the past!" (3) "Long live the Republic!" (4) "Elvis is not dead; he's in Cleveland!"

The obvious lesson is that it is difficult to speak over distractions. This fun lesson graphically reinforces the need for respect and attention to speakers.

11. Quiz Break

This is a fun challenge to solve problems as a team. Best used after lunch or mid-day to revive and refresh the group. Give each team 15 minutes. Call time. Whichever team has the most right wins a prize.

Some months have 31 days; how many have 28?

In baseball, how many outs are there in an inning?

Two men play five games of checkers. Each man wins the same number of games. There are no ties. Explain this.

If there are three apples and you take away two, how many do you have?

I have two U.S. coins totaling 6 cents. One is not a nickel. What are the coins?

How many times can you subtract the number 5 from 25?

How could you rearrange the letters in the words "new door" to make one word? Note that there is only one correct answer.

Where does "Thursday" come before "Wednesday?"

Solve the following word games:

For example:

HERE'S U U

means

Here's to you

CROWD

HISTORY HISTORY HISTORY

RASINGINGIN

SHOOTS SHOOTS

JURY JURY JURY JURY

12. Conditioning

This exercise shows how easy it is to condition people to give a response. Conditioning can occur when people are led in a direction by others. Conditioning occurs everyday with TV, newspaper, and magazine advertising. Sometimes we don't even know we are being conditioned. Here are some examples:

The facilitator tells the group to stand up and asks what F_O_L_K spells—"folk." Now repeat it quickly five times—folk, folk, folk, folk, folk. Then the facilitator says, "What do we call the white of an egg?" Most people automatically answer—"yolk." The correct answer, of course, is the "white of the egg."

Let's try it again. This time, the facilitator asks the group what S_I_L_K spells—"silk." Now say it quickly five times—silk, silk, silk, silk, silk. Then the facilitator says, "What do cows drink?" Most people answer—"milk." The correct answer, of course, is "water."

13. Conditioning, Part II

This exercise demonstrates the point that actions speak louder than words, or as President Richard Nixon's Attorney General John Mitchell, in a moment of candor, once told the White House press corps, "Watch what we do, not what we say."

The facilitator asks the group to stand and do a limbering exercise. The facilitator says that the group should do exactly as she says. The facilitator says, "Extend your right arm and make a circle with your thumb and forefinger." The facilitator demonstrates the action. Then she continues, "Now, wave your right hand, maintaining the circle, around in a big circle." The facilitator demonstrates the action. Then she continues, "Now, bring the circle at the end of your hand to your chin." However, the facilitator brings her hand to the side of her temple. She then pauses. Look around at the group but say nothing for 5-10 seconds. Most people will begin to realize their error and move their hand from their temple to their chin. The facilitator then reinforces the main point—focus on the actions and the words, they may be different. Watch out for mixed messages. Watch out for barriers to communication.

14. F Exercise

This exercise illustrates that people often see what they want to see or see what seems familiar; items of seeming prominence catch our attention, while apparent but less important items pass by with little notice.

The facilitator passes out copies of the following clip face-down to the group [NOTE: the word breaks–hyphenations–should look exactly as shown below]:

FEATURE FILMS ARE THE RE-
SULT OF YEARS OF SCIENTI-
FIC STUDY COMBINED WITH
THE EXPERIENCE OF YEARS.

When everyone has one, the facilitator asks the group to turn the clip over and simply count the number of times the letter “F” appears on the clip. Allow only 30 seconds, then ask the group to turn the clip face down again. The facilitator then stands by the flipchart and draws a line straight down the page. On the left hand side of the line, she writes a 3 and below it a 4 and below it a 5 and below it a 6. The she asks, “How many of you found 3 “Fs? Raise your hand.” She then counts and records the number left of the line opposite the number 3. She then does the same for 4s, 5s, and 6s. She then tells the group that everyone had the same clip of paper. She then asks everyone to turn the clip over and count again—she repeats the recording.

Process: Why couldn’t everyone see all the “Fs”—there are 6 of them. The “F” in the word “of” sounds to us like a “v” when we read it. How can we persuade people to pay more attention to detail?

References

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