

ICEBREAKERS AND TEAM BUILDERS

Other than “public speaking” there is probably no other phrase that strikes fear in people’s hearts than “icebreakers.” Now why are these words so threatening? Probably because we’ve all had bad icebreaker experiences. Announce to a group that you are going to lead an icebreaker, and you’re likely to get groans and moans in response. Icebreakers, themselves, don’t deserve this bad rap! When facilitated correctly, they are an effective way to help people get to know each other and to begin the team building process.

WHAT MAKES A BAD ICEBREAKER BAD?

A bad icebreaker is one that:

- makes people feel uncomfortable
- embarrasses someone
- is overly silly
- pressures someone into revealing personal information
- doesn’t seem to have a point

WHAT MAKES A GOOD ICEBREAKER GOOD?

Good icebreakers, on the other hand:

- are fun
- energize the group
- help people get to know each other
- breaks down stereotypes and preconceptions
- serves as a metaphor for teamwork

THINGS TO CONSIDER WHEN SELECTING AN ICEBREAKER

- size of the group (you may want to break into smaller sub-groups)
- familiarity of the group (no need for a name game if every one knows each other)
- location of the activity (will you have room to move around)
- equipment needed for the activity (some require props, others don’t)
- time allotted for the activity (shorter activities will hold people’s attention better)

NAME GAMES

The purpose of these activities is to help everyone learn names.

M&M Game

Pass around a bag of M&Ms or other candy and instruct everyone to take as many as they would like, but not to eat them yet. Then, each person must share one thing about himself or herself for each M&M they took. (You could also use toilet paper.)

Sears Catalog

Each person in the group chooses an item that might be found in a department store catalog. The item must start with the same first letter as their first name and should be something that describes something about the person (for example, ‘Susan Stereo’). The first person in the group gives his or her name and the catalog object. The second person repeats what the first one said then gives his or her own name and object. The third person repeats the first two, then his or her name and object... and so

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on around the group. This will help memorize names plus give a bit of information about each person. After the group has repeated the name once, have everyone take seats elsewhere within the group and try it again. Variations: Use animals (Sarah Salamander), food groups (Mark Marshmallow), vacation sites (Steve San Francisco). Warning: if doing this activity with a large group, do not repeat every name every time – it will take forever! Instead, have the group repeat the name once, instead of over and over and over again.

State Map

On the floor, draw imaginary boundaries of the state you are in (or of the United States if the group is very geographically diverse) and ask participants to locate their hometowns in relation to the other participants. Have them sit, and then one at a time introduce themselves to the group. They may answer a question such as, “What is your fondest memory of your hometown?” or another question relevant to the group. A variation would be to have participants find the person who grew up in closest proximity to them, then have the participants introduce their partner to the group.

Group Juggling

Have the group stand in a circle. The facilitator throws a ball to someone saying his or her name. That person throws it to someone, saying their name, and so on until everyone in the group has had the ball once (and only once). The group then tries to repeat the pattern as quickly as possible. Try it a few times, and let the group use their creative solving powers to complete the task in under 10 seconds. After a few tries, someone will undoubtedly suggest standing in order, or other creative solutions. A variation would be to start the activity as described, but on the second or third try, add new elements to the patterns (Frisbees, other balls, etc.). When processing, bring out themes of how college is sometimes not how you expect it to be, you have several balls in the air at the same time, etc.

Everybody Go

Have the group stand in a circle. One at a time, a person says their name and does an action. The group then repeats the name and the actions. Keep the group moving quickly to keep the energy up.

The Meaning of My Name

Have each member share why or how the member received his/her name.

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The purpose of these activities is to learn a little bit more about someone, beyond their name.

Beach Ball

Have the group sit in a circle. The person with the beach ball (or other object) asks a question and throws the ball to someone else in the group. That person then answers the question. They get to ask the next question and then throw the ball to someone else. The activity can go through several rounds. Another twist would be to write a series of questions on a beach ball, toss it around the group, and have the person answer the question where their right thumb lands.

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Getting to Know You Poker

Make up a key for a deck of cards (e.g., if you draw a 2, share a pet peeve). Have each member draw 3 – 5 cards and then share their answers with either to the large group, or to a partner or smaller group.

Roundabout

Have the group form two large circles, one inside the other. The groups should face each other. They should introduce themselves to the person standing across from them. The facilitator will then pose a question for the pair to discuss, e.g., “What was your favorite class in high school, and why?” or “What do you hope to accomplish this year?” “What one thing are you most looking forward to?” “What are you nervous about?” etc. After giving the participants time to answer the question, the facilitator will then direct one of the circles to move, e.g., “Inner circle move three people counter-clockwise.” The process repeats. At the end of the exercise, have a few people share some of the stories they learned.

Human Bingo

Using the Human BINGO cards, have participants mill around the room and find people who fit a category on their card. The person should sign their name, and tell a story related to the item. (e.g., if I sign my name as someone who grew up on a farm, then I would tell a funny story about the time the chickens got out of the coup during a rainstorm.) Participants can only sign someone else’s card once. You can either continue the game until someone has all of the spaces filled, or play for a certain time and see how many people can fill.

Equipment: Using a blank “BINGO” card, fill in the blanks with items such as, “favorite food is chocolate”, “only child”, “loves to read”, “grew up on a farm”, etc. Photocopy enough cards for all of the participants.

Forced Choice

Ask members to stand in the middle of the room and have them move to either side to indicate their choice. Have them find a partner on the side they have chosen and discuss reasons for their choice.

Are you:

- More like a Cadillac than a Volkswagen?
- More of a saver than a spender?
- More like New York than South Dakota?
- More yes than no?
- More like a student than a teacher?
- More here than there?
- More religious than non-religious?
- More like the present than the future?
- More intuitive than rational?
- More like a tortoise than a hare?
- More like a computer than a quill pen?
- More like a roller skate than a pogo stick?
- More like a river than a lake?
- More like a restaurant than a McDonald’s?

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GROUPING ACTIVITIES

The purpose of these activities is to have fun ways for breaking people into small groups, pairs, trios, etc. Without a grouping activity, people will likely pair up using the “proximity factor” – the person closest to them (and usually someone they already know).

Famous Couples

Tape to each person’s back the name of one-half of a famous couple. (e.g. Mickey/Minnie, Lois/Clark, Bill/Hillary, Thelma/Louise, etc.) Participants then need to find someone else in the group, introduce themselves to each other and then ask one yes/no question about the name taped on their back. (Am I a human? Am I alive? Am I an actor? etc.) Then they need to move on to a new person in the group, introduce themselves and ask another question. Once they have deduced who they are, they need to find their “mate.”

Line Up

Have the participants line up, without talking, by height. Have them introduce themselves to the people on either side of them. Then have participants line up in alpha order, by first names (or for a challenge, by last names or middle names). Then have participants line up by birth date, (not year). Other line-ups may be added. Once they have mixed around a few times, then put them into groups.

Balloon Groups

Pre-count different color balloons (or candy, or stickers or whatever) for the group sizes you want. Then pass around the balloons, having each person take one, blow it up and then get together with others that have the same color balloon.

ENERGIZERS

These are fun activities to help kick the energy level of the group up a notch!

Hula-Hoops

Have the group stand in a circle, holding hands with one hula-hoop hanging between two people. The object is to pass the hoop around the circle with each person stepping through the hoop. Added dimensions would include using two hoops, then using four hoops, having hoops going in different directions, doing the exercise without talking, or a competition between groups as a race. A nice closing exercise is to form one large group, with an inner and outer circle. People should stand back to back with someone else, and act as if they were one person.

I Love My Neighbor

This is a variation on musical chairs. Each member of the group is seated on chairs that are sitting in a circle or semicircle, except for the facilitator, who is standing in the center. The facilitator starts by introducing himself or herself: “Hi, my name is Karen.” The group is then instructed to respond: “Hi, Karen!” Then the facilitator would complete the statement, “I love my neighbor, especially people who...” and adding on a physical characteristic: e.g., “are wearing white shoes” or “have short hair.” Anyone in the group who matches that physical characteristic must get up and change seats with someone else. (Meanwhile, the facilitator is finding a seat!) The person left without a place to sit goes to the middle of the circle and repeats the process.

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LOW-RISK ACTIVITIES

These activities are physical challenges to test the group's problem solving skills. They can be used as energizers, but they have a metaphor you can process at the end. After the activity, facilitate a discussion about the need the Frosh will have to lean on each other to accomplish their goals.

All Aboard

Have all participants in a groups of about eight to twelve people attempt to stand on a tree stump, on a baseball base or in a square taped on the floor, with no body parts touching the ground and hold for thirty seconds. If using a taped square, make the square smaller for each try.

Circle Lean

The circle lean occurs in the same circle. Everyone counts off; one, two, one, two etc. While holding hands, the ones lean out and the twos lean in. By supporting each other, the members should be at a 45-degree angle.

Circle Sit

For the circle sit, the group simply stands up where it's at and moves the papers, etc., to the outside. Everyone turns the same direction and puts one hand in (similar to the hokey-pokey). Everyone moves toward the center of the circle until they are touching the people in front and behind them. (Note: make sure it is still a circle - creative geometry causes the collapse faster.) Then, on the count of three, everyone sits down on the lap of the person behind them. If the group is really coordinated, try to walk forward as a group.

PROBLEM SOLVING ACTIVITIES

These activities get the brain juices flowing and illustrate the importance of working as a team to solve problems.

Geometry

In a large, open area, blindfold everyone in the group. Place a long rope in the center of the group. Instruct members to work together to find the rope, and to outline a circle/square/triangle/etc., on the ground. When they have finished, they may all step back and remove their blindfolds.
Equipment Needed: blindfolds for all members, long rope.

Knots

Have group stand in a circle. (Form two groups if you have more than 10 people.) Everyone should stick their left hand up and put in the circle (another hokey pokey thing) and hold the hand of someone else in the circle that is not directly across the circle from them. This process is repeated with the right hands. Without letting go, the group must untangle themselves into a circle again. For a challenge, have the group repeat the exercise without talking, or with two or three members blindfolded or both.
Equipment Needed: blindfolds

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THE BIG THAW

These activities are designed to be used after the ice has been broken to help your group get to know each other on a deeper level – how deep is up to you!

Separations and Connections

Start with everyone standing in the center of the room. The facilitator will start by stepping away from the group and making a statement, such as, “I grew up on a farm.” Other people who have that in common with that person would then join the facilitator in forming a second group. Others in the group should then be encouraged to break off and make their own statements. The facilitator should make sure that the groups have time to form, before moving on to the next statement. Depending on the group, the statements could range from silly, “I hate broccoli” to serious, “I am HIV positive.”

First Impressions

The first impressions exercise is designed to establish a common ground for groups that have a varied length of acquaintance and skill levels. A piece of paper that has been divided into eight sections is taped or pinned on each person’s back. Members then write their first impression of eight different people on the appropriate person’s back (everyone should have their eight squares filled in by eight different people). Remember this should be the very first impression of that person, so it may require remembering back a while. When everyone has finished, the group should form a circle, remove their sheets, and read them to themselves. Members may share any information that they feel comfortable with, but disclosure is not necessary for this exercise. Processing Questions: Are there things that surprise you? Things you think are accurate? Inaccurate? How did you feel not knowing what other people were writing on your back? How do you feel now, seeing what was written?

Name Tags or Personal Crest

Each person is given a large sheet of paper (newsprint/flipchart paper) and markers or crayons. The facilitator instructs them to divide their paper into four quadrants. In one quadrant they should draw a picture (no words) that is representative of their childhood. The second quadrant should be a picture representative of their young adult/high school days. The third quadrant should be of their present and the fourth quadrant should be of their future. They should have adequate time to complete their drawings. One at a time, each participant should stand and describe/explain their name tag to the group. The drawings can then be mounted on the wall for the duration of the retreat/workshop. Variation: have participants post their pictures on the walls, and then have people guess which person drew which picture. Then they would explain their drawing.

MISCELLANEOUS TIPS

Here are a few tips you can use if your group is not being responsive:

- Break people into groups of two or three and give them a task. Have them find out specific information about their partner and share it back to the group.
- Give each person a slip a paper to write down a question or concern. Have then fold it up, slip it into a balloon and them after a brief round of “balloon volleyball”, have each person pop a balloon, read the question and then discuss as a group the issues presented.



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- Give each person a stack of post-it notes and a marker. Have them list on each sheet feelings, thoughts, concerns, ideas, etc. Then have them post them around the room and discuss common items.
- Give each person an index card or piece of paper. Have everyone write down a question for you to answer.

Remember: the possibilities are only limited by your imagination! Be creative, have fun and the group will too!