

ICEBREAKERS

These are some favorite “icebreakers” to help teams and groups get into a relaxed and open frame of mind for discussing important issues. Each of these icebreakers has proven successful many times over – so they’re guaranteed to work. Pick and choose – or try them all. This is a great tool for leaders, consultants, and facilitators.

Favorite Team

Ask people in advance to bring a memento of their favorite team. When the meeting starts, ask people to 1) describe the significance of the item they brought and 2) describe why this was their favorite team. (It’s valuable to flip chart their responses – you’ll get a good set of data to use in constructing norms for high-performing teams.) We still remember the woman who brought her three-foot-tall bowling trophy.

Viva la Difference!

This icebreaker gets people moving around the room in a hurry. In preparation, think of some specific food items, movie actors, musical groups, and other popular or controversial figures that people are likely to have strong opinions about. Then designate four points in the room for people who 1) love it; 2) are lukewarm about it; 3) dislike it; 4) can’t stand it. Make sure people are very clear which corner represents what.

If you’re acting as facilitator, tell people to move quickly into the appropriate corner when you call out a word. Keep the pace moving and you’ll get a lot of smiles in a hurry. (Some items we’ve used: avocados, stock car racing, cats, tomatoes, and karaoke. You get the idea.)

Own the Room

We borrowed this icebreaker from Peter Block. Tell the group it has important work to do today, and that it’s important that they own everything they do – starting with the arrangement of the room itself. Tell them that they can arrange the room any way they want, it’s up to them. The only criterion is this: They have to own the room and own whatever gets produced in the room. Tell them they have 15 minutes to decide and to act. Then leave the room.

We’ve come back and found all the chairs in a tight circle. We’ve even found all the furniture piled in a corner – people wanted no furniture at all, just a large space in which to play.

Powerful Listening

In advance of the meeting, print and make copies of the following instructions: On one sheet write “Instructions for A.” On the second write “Instructions for B.” On A’s sheet, write: “Tell a story to B about something you did recently that made you feel good about your work.” On B’s sheet write: “When listening to A, avoid making eye contact.”

When the meeting begins, ask people to divide into groups of two. Ask each two-person group to designate someone as “A” and the other as “B.” Ask all the As to raise their hands and hand them their instructions. Repeat for the Bs.

After the instructions are in everyone's hands, ask the groups to begin doing what the instructions say. Let the conversation flow for 3-4 minutes. Then stop the action. Ask the group what they experienced and how they felt.

Typically, you'll hear remarks like: "I don't think B was listening to me." Or "I felt disrespected." Or "I lost my train of thought." Summarize their responses and emphasize the importance of body language in listening. This is an exercise that will have lasting effects throughout the day.