



## Introduction

When groups get together for the first time, participants often do not know each other well or at all. Before working together on any task, members need to go through a process of getting to know each other and building some sort of initial relationship. Varieties of methods for doing this have been devised which are known as **icebreakers**, for the very reason that they are designed to 'break the ice' between strangers. Icebreakers also help participants relax and gain confidence to speak in front of a group. They encourage participation and mutual support among the participants of a training session.

## When to use

Icebreakers are usually used at the beginning of a training course, but they can also be used whenever "ice" has frozen communications. Often halfway through a course the trainees have formed themselves into cliques based on sex or race or jobs, or other criteria. An icebreaker could then be well worthwhile to reunite the whole group.

## Choosing a suitable icebreaker

Icebreakers will work with all groups provided a suitable selection is made of the most appropriate exercise for each group. There are many books of icebreakers available. When you are going through a particular book to choose a suitable icebreaker consider:

**The culture background:** If the participants are from the same culture, choose an icebreaker, which fits into their culture. If the participants are from different cultures, you have to keep in mind

that, possibly they don't like to touch each other or they don't like to be

too close to each other. In this case avoid icebreakers which require such activities.

**Gender:** If there are female participants, consider their culture background, shyness, etc. Choose icebreakers which fit into their culture and character. Don't choose icebreakers which humiliate or make fun of either male or female participants.

**How well they know each other:** If the participants already know each other, then icebreakers usually are not needed. They can be used if the "ice" has frozen communication between them.

**Time available:** Consider the time available in the schedule of the course, so that other sessions will not be effected.

**Safety:** The safety of participants should be first priority. Don't use icebreakers which can be dangerous.

**Handicapped participants:** How will the activity effect handicapped participants? Plan for an icebreaker in where body movements are not required, or where only oral exchanges are enough to break the ice.

**Shy and reluctant participants:** How can shy and reluctant participants be encouraged to participate in an activity? Try to find out the reasons for not participating, then try to convince them. But if they are not ready to participate, appoint them as observers.

**Previous experience of participants:** If the participants are already familiar with the ice breaking activity, don't give a long explanation, just start the activity promptly.

## Conducting an icebreaker

**1. Provide instructions:** Prepare written instructions, then photocopy the instructions for the participants and hand them out with

a few words of explanation. You could simply describe the instructions verbally and not bother about photocopying them, but this is not recommended. It is very easy to leave out vital points. With verbal instruction, participants may forget parts of what was said, or misunderstand the situation despite the fact that the explanation may have been extremely clear. In case of confusion you should not hesitate to give instructions whenever needed.

**2. Organize the room:** the furniture arrangements are something you should consider carefully before running an activity. Icebreakers are intended to help people meet each other. A room full of armchairs, or of desks nailed to floor, may be an impediment to running the particular event. It may be necessary, or useful, to move the furniture against the walls. Consider running an icebreaker outside the classroom.

**3. Provide materials:** The instructor should provide sufficient quantity of materials. Consider what other special materials are required – clipboards, notice board, tape recorders, cameras, duplicating equipment, flat surfaces for writing, and even cups of tea or coffee – all depending on the nature of the icebreaker itself.

**4. Decide on observers or assistants:** Decide in relation to participant numbers involved, whether you may need any help. Should you ask the participants for a volunteer assistant? Do you need to have an observer or two? These are all options worth considering.

**5. Monitor the activity:** Avoid hinting and coaching. Allow participants to break the ice between themselves during the activity. Do not sit down next to the participants and ask how they are getting on. Be there till the activity ends.

**6. Conduct a debriefing:** Debriefing usually means a discus-

sion after the event. While a debriefing is unusual after running an icebreaker, you should still think of a debriefing as a natural outlet for allowing people to say what they think. A debriefing of five to ten minutes should be sufficient in most cases.

### Example icebreakers

Icebreakers should be a quick and comfortable method for new participants to meet each other. The simpler and more natural the approach, the more likely it is to succeed. They shouldn't demand deep personal disclosures or actions, which could make people feel ill at ease. Enjoyment, when meeting people, is an excellent way of breaking ice.

### Getting-to-know-you exercises

**Paired discussion:** Deliberately create time for participants to meet and talk to one or two other people. At its simplest, a getting-to-know-you activity involves participants forming into pairs and being given five minutes to talk to each other – about anything. Customarily, people ask “safe” questions about names, jobs, workplaces, distances traveled to the event, and so on.

**Welcoming committee:** Much of the tension can be removed from an initial meeting of any group or course if the leader stands near the entrance to greet people as they arrive. The leader can also introduce strangers to each other in much the same way as you might at a party.

**The cup of tea:** A very British icebreaker, one we are all familiar with. Providing refreshments at the outset of any meeting provides its own focus. People gravitate towards the kitchen area, help each other, and ask questions (“How many sugars?”), this can lead to other conversations.

### Name games

**Name chain:** An embarrassment for many people joining a group is their difficulty in remembering the names of other participants. Several icebreaker exercises address this problem. Sitting in a circle, the first person says his/her name. The second person says his/her name and, pointing to the first person, adds, “And this is...” The third person says his/her name and, pointing back to each person who has already spoken, says, “And this and that is...” The exercise continues in a cumulative way until everyone is introduced and repeat the names of all the others.

**Picture “hook”:** People can fail to remember names unless they have a simple “hook” to help the recall. This exercise provides the hook. Each person draws a simple picture or sketch, which represents their names. They then introduce themselves to the group and explain the picture. The association of person and picture in other participants' minds will normally help recall the name. In a similar way, asking each person to do a self-introduction and add a funny or surprising personal anecdote will also help to fix names and characters in the minds of the rest of the group.

### Conclusion

When participants meet for the first time, many questions arise within themselves, like what is his/her name? job? hobbies? country? education? etc. Very

often there is a tense atmosphere among the participants and the instructor. To provide the answers to the above questions and to reduce much of the tension, icebreakers are an appropriate tool. There are many pre-prepared ice-breaking activities available. They can be directly adapted to meet almost any training need. The choice of activities will greatly depend on different factors like culture, gender, time available etc. If we use icebreakers properly, the activity will ease the atmosphere of the teaching-learning process and we can easily start to reach the learning objectives of our course.

### Performance Guide

#### Use Icebreakers

#### Did the instructor

- **before the activity consider:**

1. the cultural background of the participants?
2. their gender?
3. how well they know each other?
4. the time available?
5. the safety precautions?
6. the participation of handicapped?
7. the participation of shy and reluctant people?
8. the previous experience of participants?
9. select an appropriate icebreaker?
10. organise the room?
11. decide to have observers, assistants?

- **during the activity**

1. provide instructions?
2. provide sufficient materials?
3. give instructions whenever needed?
4. monitor the activity?

- **after the activity**

1. conduct a debriefing?

For an effective icebreaker, all steps should be checked “YES.”