Icebreakers

At the beginning of a training session, warm-up exercises, or icebreakers, serve several functions. They:

- allow participants to get to know each other;
- provide a way for everyone to participate and begin to feel comfortable in a group setting;
- establish a context in which everyone is expected to talk and be listened to; and,
- raise the level of trust and support within the group, paving the way for facilitation techniques which involve some risk-taking.

If participants are asked their expectations for the workshop, the icebreaker also:

- gives the group members an opportunity to articulate their reasons for attending and their particular reasons for being interested in the topic(s);
- actively demonstrates an interest in and commitment to the training experience; and,
- gives the facilitator an opportunity to gain insight into the interests and experiences of the group members.

Icebreaker suggestions:

Through Other People’s Eyes: The group forms into pairs and each person introduces him/herself through the eyes of another person, such as a friend, a parent, a well-liked neighbor, the bank manager or a spouse or partner. Repeat the activity until each person has been introduced.

Variations

- Concentric Circles: Rotate pairs by having the group form two concentric circles, one inside and one outside, with each person in the inside circle facing a partner on the outside circle. Shift partners for each round by asking one of the circles to rotate. You could ask the partners to answer with the same category, or you could change the categories (e.g., the outside person introduces him/herself from mother’s eyes; the inside person introduces him/herself from a teacher’s eyes).

- Point of View: This exercise can be used as an introduction to a content issue during the program. State the issue, and ask the participants to talk about the issue from the point of view of the key players. For example, if the issue is racial profiling, ask the participants to talk about racial profiling from the point of view of a police officer, from the point of view of a young man of color, from the point of view of an elderly woman of color, and from the point of view of a middle-aged white businessman.

Best Friend: is a similar activity to “Through Other People’s Eyes.” The group sits in a circle. Each person is given a sheet of paper and pen or pencil. The leader asks everyone to relax for a few minutes. “Take a deep breath. Slowly, take another deep breath, close your eyes. Keep taking deep breaths and think about a person who knows you very well — your spouse, a sibling, a friend or co-worker — someone you can call a ‘best friend.’ With a clear picture of that person in mind, take out a piece of paper and write down how this person would introduce you.”

The leader can give some possibilities:

1. ________________________ is the kind of person who likes _______________________.
2. Someday, ________________________ would like to _______________________.
3. ________________________ thinks it is important to _______________________.
4. ________________________ is my best friend because _______________________.


**Dictionary Introductions:** Have the group sit in a circle and pass a dictionary around. Each person closes his/her eyes and points to a word anywhere in the dictionary. He/she opens his/her eyes and makes a sentence about him/herself using that word. This can also be done in pairs but would require a lot more dictionaries (one for each pair). Another variation is to use any book giving each person three numbers: the first for the page, the second for the line and the third for the word in that line they are to use.

**The Name Game:** Have the group sit in a circle; one person begins by introducing him/herself and saying one thing about him/herself. The next person repeats what he/she said and adds his/her own introduction. The third person repeats the first two names and adds his/her own and so on around the circle. If you cannot recall a name or what someone said about themselves, you simply ask that person. This one is good for laughter — and there is some diplomacy in having the facilitator(s) go last!

**Me, The Potato:** The group sits in a circle and each person is given a potato. They are asked to make friends with their potato, to give it a name, to describe to the group its qualities, its strengths and weaknesses, and how the potato resembles themselves. When each potato has been fully described, they are all put together and each person sees if they can pick out their own.

**Variation:**
- **Me, The Object:** Put together a collection of different things in a box (rock, pen, jewelry, watch, puppet, plastic bag, doll, truck, etc.). Ask the participants to rummage through the box (with their eyes open) and select the object that best describes them. Have them explain their choice.

**Autobiographies:** If the members of the group are known in advance, ask each participant to send a brief paragraph about themselves prior to the educational event. The leaders and organizers can suggest topics such as personal or family history, likes and dislikes, motivation for coming to the event, expectations about the event, and so on. The paragraphs can be compiled into a Who's Who of the event, then duplicated and each person given a copy, or they can be put on a wall chart with photographs (use a Polaroid camera or ask folks to bring a snapshot) as a Who's Who Gallery.

**Washing the Elephant:** The facilitator asks three people to leave the room and explains to the rest of the group that he/she is going to “wash the elephant.” Using an imaginary pail of water and cloth, he/she washes the sides and trunk, lifts the ears and tail and so on. A member of the group then volunteers to demonstrate with no words what he/she has seen the facilitator do. One of the people outside the room is brought back and silently observes the mimed demonstration. The second person is brought back and the first demonstrates what he/she has seen. The second person then demonstrates for the third person. The third person tells the group what he/she thought the second person was doing. The second person tells the group what the first person was doing. The first person tells what he/she thought the person from the group was doing. The group can then discuss observations, communications and assumptions.

**I Wish:** The group is seated in a circle and the leader asks everyone to think of something they have always wanted to be or do. The leader offers an example, “I’ve always wanted to parachute from an airplane because...” Each person in the group has one minute to tell what they have always wanted to be or do and why. Another variation on this activity is to have the group imagine that they can make a choice about coming back to earth as a bird or an animal. Have each person take one minute to say what he/she would choose to be and why. These two exercises help participants reveal their feelings and can be used after
an initial opener or at the end of the workshop.

**Animal, Vegetable or Mineral?** Have each participant draw a picture of him/herself, either as an animal, vegetable or mineral. Explain the pictures. Alternatively, ask each person to draw an animal whose traits/qualities represent aspects of his/her personality; another person to draw a vegetable, and the third a mineral.

**Introduction by Pairs:** Have the participants divide into groups of two, with each person finding another person that he/she doesn't know well. The facilitator can outline the information to be exchanged (for example: name, type of work, how they became involved in the organization, and the funniest thing that happened to them last month). Give the pairs approximately 20-30 minutes. Back in the large group, have everyone stand up and introduce the person with whom they talked, giving the answers to all the questions.

**Variation:**
- **Find the Shoe:** This introduction exercise is useful in groups where the participants have had little or no prior contact with each other. Divide into two groups, either randomly or using some criteria (geography, hair color, and gender). Ask all the members of one group to remove one of their shoes and throw the shoes into a pile in the middle of the room. Ask each member of the second group to choose a shoe, find the shoe’s owner, and then pair up with that person for introductions.

**Quick Question:** Take a few minutes for participants to think about a question asked by the facilitator (such as, “What do you remember about your first day in school?” or “What do you remember about the day you joined this organization?”). After giving the participants some time to think, ask each person to give their name and their answer (in 30 seconds or less).

**Toilet Paper:** The facilitator should hold a roll of toilet paper between the fingers of two hands. Approach each participant and tell him/her to take as long a piece as he/she would like. Do not tell people what the toilet paper will be used for, but encourage them to take a lot. After everyone has taken as many squares of toilet paper as they want, the facilitator should tell them that each person has to say one thing about themselves for every square they have! Participants should tell things such as where they live, how many people are in their family, what a favorite food is, etc.

**Learning Exchange:** This exercise works both as an introduction and a reflection exercise for discussing the process of learning and teaching. The facilitator introduces the session by asking participants to recall some of the skills they have acquired formally during the past two years or so (how to change the oil in a car, how to plant Christmas trees, how to make a special pastry, etc.). Ask each person to write down his/her name, along with one or two skills he/she could teach to others, on an index card. The cards are laid out in the middle of the room. Ask the participants to examine all the cards, and either select a skill they would like to learn, or agree to teach their skill to another participant. The pairs then engage in a teaching/learning process (10-15 minutes). Then find different partners for another teaching/learning process. When the entire group reconvenes, briefly discuss the experience, as well as factors that enhance teaching and learning.

**Life Map:** On newsprint, each person uses a crayon to draw a picture of his/her life (with stick people and symbols).

**Sandwich Boards:** On one large piece of newsprint, each participant lists “Things that I know.” On another piece of newsprint, he/she lists “Things that I want to know.” The two pieces are joined by tape, sandwich board style, and the participants circulate informally
getting to know each other.

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