



## Using Icebreakers to Defrost a Chilly Atmosphere and Build Warm Relationships

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Published in the SPBT Focus Magazine Spring 2004

It's 2 p.m. and you're into your third day of a two-week training class with new representatives. You are about to introduce a new topic that includes important content, so it's critical that the learners are alert and focused. Unfortunately, the energy level in the room is at an all-time low.

Does this sound familiar? What can you do to change the pace and tone of the workshop, give your representatives the opportunity to get to know each other better, and still use the time productively? The answer is to incorporate an icebreaker.

Icebreakers provide a welcome break during a long day of training. Similar to energizers, they wake participants up. But unlike energizers, icebreakers have a purpose and should be relevant to your content. With icebreakers, you need to allow time for a quick debrief so the participants can understand the relevance of the icebreaker to the topic you are about to introduce.

Here are a few proven icebreakers we have used.

### How Similar Are We?

This activity is based on something we do instinctively when we meet someone new -- we look for things we have in common. The objective is to give people the opportunity to get to know each other better and start to build relationships.

Participants can work in groups of two, three, six or eight, or by table. Give each group a pen and paper.

Participants are to record all the things they have in common with others at the table, but which they cannot identify by looking at each other. They are to list as many things as they can within a given time. Some examples include:

- All play the same musical instrument
- All speak the same foreign language
- All have siblings that are the same age
- All drive the same type of car
- All have the same hobby.

Since you can see that everyone in your group is female, or that you all have dark hair, these don't count and thus shouldn't be recorded.

Debrief by pointing out how many commonalities people can find within a few minutes. Highlight the fact that people build relationships by looking for common ground, and this is how we build relationships with customers and managers as well.

## Investigative Journalists

The objective of this icebreaker is to help participants get to know each other in about five to 10 minutes.

Provide index cards or paper and a pencil to each participant. Let them know that for the next five to 10 minutes, they will be investigative journalists. Before the activity can begin, everyone needs to record two open-ended questions that begin with "what" or "how" to learn more about other people in the room -- but nothing too personal! For example, "How many brothers and sisters do you have? What is your all-time favorite movie?" Other inquiries could center around pets, favorite musicians, hobbies, favorite books, or famous people they admire and would like to meet.

On your cue, participants mingle and interview as many people as they can in the time available. As they ask their questions, they record the person's name and their response. When the time is up, have them return to their tables to form groups and share with others in their group what they learned about other people in the room.

To build relationships with the whole group, ask for a few examples of what participants learned, and if they discovered anything they had in common with the people they interviewed.

Debrief by using this activity to discuss the importance of asking open-ended questions to gather information from customers.

## A “Smarties” Icebreaker

The objective is to help participants get to know each other. This activity takes about five to 10 minutes for a group of five to eight people. You’ll need a bowl of multicolored “SMARTIES®” (Skittles® or M&Ms® work well, too) at each table, and a list of color-coded questions on a flip chart or PowerPoint slide.

At each table, place a dish with at least one candy in it for each person. Be sure to include different colored candies in each dish. Keep the candies covered until you are prepared to begin the exercise to prevent people from eating them too soon! Ask the participants to take one candy from the dish, but not to eat it yet. Tell the group that each candy has been pre-assigned a question that will help them to get to know the other people at their table. Explain that they are to share the information with the others at the table that corresponds to the color of the candy they chose.

Show them the questions that are on your visual. They may share their responses with their group or with the entire class, either in random order or in the order by color as you presented the questions. Once the exercise is over, invite them to eat their candies.

An option is to put out a large bowl of candies and allow them to take as many as they wish, but ask them to select only one to three candies for the exercise.

In addition to being an exercise to get to know each other, this exercise is a great, short warm-up presentation when teaching presentation skills. It could also be used as a review technique by color-coding questions to test the participants on the course content.

Debrief by asking about the advantages of building relationships with fellow employees, or according to how you have used the exercise.

## Nickels Icebreaker

This activity encourages teamwork, and takes about five minutes. You’ll need a \$10 bill.

To begin, show the participants the \$10 bill. Tell them they cannot leave the room during this exercise. Say that the first person to bring you 20 nickels will get the \$10. Wait and watch what happens. Initially some people may not believe you.

Once you provide reassurance that you are serious, they will start to search for nickels. Since it is very rare for one person to have 20 nickels, they have to pool their efforts.

When they hand you 20 nickels, give them the \$10. If they really don't have 20 nickels between all of them, encourage them to think creatively and allow them to draw the 20 nickels.

Debrief by leading a discussion about the power of teamwork.

## Strain Your Brain

This activity stimulates creative thinking as people get to know each other. It takes about five minutes. You'll need six pencils for each group.

Divide the participants into groups of four or five people. Tell them that they have five minutes to figure out how to make four triangles with six pencils. Although there are several ways to solve the puzzle, tell them there is one "best" solution you are looking for.

The "ideal" solution: place three pencils on the table in a triangle shape, then use the three remaining pencils to create a vertical triangle (like a teepee).

Debrief by leading a discussion about the need to "think out of the box" when dealing with challenging situations or problems. This exercise serves as a good lead-in to any activity that requires them to brainstorm for new ideas.

With senior management pushing us to get our representatives back in the field as quickly as possible, we are often faced with the challenge of covering the same amount of content in less time. As a result, everything we do in the classroom needs to accomplish more than one thing. To get "more bang for your buck," incorporate icebreakers into your training. You will have more alert and focused representatives, and you'll help them see the value of building relationships with their peers and their customers.

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