

ICEBREAKERS & TEAM BUILDERS

When gathering a new group, having a retreat, or welcoming new people into an existing group, there often is an activity that comes right after the welcome with the intent to create an open environment. This activity is generally referred to as an “icebreaker.” This resource will explore the definition of an icebreaker, offer some resources and tips, and help this simple activity reach its purpose.

Definitions

Icebreaker

- Purpose is to lighten the environment
- Involves introduction of participants
- Requires minimal supplies and setup
- Takes less than 10 minutes to complete

Team Builder

- Purpose is to develop positive team dynamics
- Can be used with an already established group (no introductions needed)
- Requires supplies and setup
- Can take longer than 20 minutes
- Can involve group reflection on the activity immediately following the activity

Which one should we do?

To answer this question, you should decide what you need the group to get out of the activity. If this is a new group or you are bringing in new members to the group, you should do an icebreaker that allows for participants to get to know one another. If this group has already been established and you want them to become a stronger, more cohesive group, you should be doing a team building activity. There are instances where you may benefit from doing both activities, like a retreat or long meeting where the time you have allows for both.

Your purpose or desired outcome doesn't have to be complex. With an icebreaker, the answer can simply be having people know everyone's name or creating a welcoming environment. For a team building activity, the reason may be more in-depth, such as promoting trust and communication in a group or reducing in-fighting or negative attitudes.

Why Are We Doing This?

This is a question you should always ask yourself when deciding on an activity. This will help you choose an activity that will give you your desired outcome or help solve a group issue. Answering the question will also help if you have any participants who are “too cool for school” and don't want to participate because they don't see the benefit. Being able to articulate the larger purpose will help you get buy-in from your members and ultimately have a more successful activity.

Tips for Icebreakers or Team Builders

- **Be prepared.** Plan ahead and rehearse if you can. Nothing is worse than being unprepared and not having the activity go smoothly.
- **Keep it simple.** Sometimes the most effective activities involve little resources or reuse previously purchased items. If it's a small part of your larger meeting agenda, it should have a small budget.
- **Be excited.** Many icebreakers and team builders push others to explore outside their comfort zone. You need excited about so the participants will be excited too.
- **There is a limit.** You don't want to spend all day doing icebreakers, and if your team is going slow, it could be a time sucker for your larger agenda. Don't schedule more than three icebreakers back to back, or participants will get bored easily. With team building activities there needs to be time limit. The activity could last longer than you intend if not kept in check. It's ok if the group does not complete the activity; there is still a lesson in trying.
- **Ask for help.** Especially for team builders, it can be useful to ask someone outside the group, such as an advisor, to facilitate the activity. This way, the group leaders can participate equally in the activity.

Resources

- [The Encyclopedia of Icebreakers](#) is the most comprehensive print resource for icebreakers. A very expensive purchase, but will last for a long time.
- <http://www.icebreakers.ws/> - This website offers free icebreakers and team building activities and you can search by group size.
- <http://jimhough.com/cf/ibquestions.html> - This is a list of questions you can ask to add some fun to your introductions.
- <http://www.huddle.com/blog/team-building-activities/> - This website offers a list of 10 team building activities that challenge a specific topic.
- <http://www.businessballs.com/teambuildinggames.htm> - Business Balls is a website for people in the workplace but this link is to their list of team building exercises.

On-Campus Opportunity

William & Mary offers a team-building Ropes Course near Lake Matoaka. Groups may reserve the space and have a staff member facilitate activities for a fee. Groups should contact the Kinesiology Department for availability at 757-221-2761.