Icebreakers & community builders

THE WILD WIND BLOWS or WHERE THE WIND BLOWS

Setup: Have the group stand in a circle in which each person has a spot marked in some way (either by an object or a chair that is turned backwards). The facilitator stands in the middle of the circle, with no spot marked for them in the circle.

How it works: The facilitator gives a direction such as "the wild wind blows for anyone who is wearing shoes that tie". Everyone who has shoes that tie gets up to find a new spot.

Whoever finds themself still looking for a spot last is the new person in the middle and should pick a new prompt that begins with "the wild wind blows for anyone who..." and state something that is true about them that may be true about others in the group. This can go on for as many rounds as you need!

When to use it: This is a great icebreaking game for any size group!

CONNECTION GAME/ACTIVITY — STEP FORWARD/STEP BACK

Setup: This is an adaptation of "Where the Wind Blows" that can be used with large groups or in spaces where movement is restricted for whatever reason. Invite everyone in the group to stand a circle.

How it works: The facilitator begins by saying something that's true about themselves, such as "I am a dog person". If that is also true for you, take a step forward. If the statement is VERY true for you, you can take a big step forward.

The facilitator invites people to look at the choices that people made and then invites people to "step back" into the circle.

After this, the facilitator can invite people to self-select as the person to make a statement and speak as they feel moved/ready. They'll copy the facilitators pattern of making a statement about themselves and stepping forward, inviting others to step forward, then inviting them to step back. Sample Prompts:

- I am dog person
- I love winter
- I prefer tea over coffee
- I am a procrastinator
- I am a morning person
- I enjoy playing sports

When to use it: Similar to The Wild Wind Blows, this is a great first activity for any size group. It puts less pressure on people to speak up if they don't want to since there are volunteers to say the next prompt.

SEE YA!

Setup: Have the whole group break up into groups of 4-5 people.

How it works: During each round, the facilitator gives you a prompt. The "winner" of each round says "See ya!" to the group, and rotates clockwise to join another group once time is up. Continue until all of the questions have been asked.

Sample questions:

- Who is wearing the best socks in the group?
- Who has the most siblings in the group?
- Who has the most pets in the group?
- Who travels the longest to get to school/work each day?
- Play rounds of Rock, Paper, Scissors until one person wins
- Who can speak the most languages in the group?
- Who has traveled to the most states?

When to use it: This activity is best for bigger groups, and a great introductory activity.

FOUR CORNERS

Setup: Indicate four corners in the room, whether by pointing or with signs up

How it works: Give the group a series of options. In each round, they need to choose the corner they are most aligned with. Examples include:

- Your favorite snacks are: Sweet, Salty, Spicy, Sour
- Movie genre: Horror, Comedy, Drama, Sci-Fi
- Choose a favorite snow day activity: Sleep, Reading, Being Outside, Movies
- Choose a dessert: Cookie, Pie, Ice Cream, Cake
- Favorite season: Winter, Spring, Summer, Fall

In each round, when people arrive at their corner, give them 1-2 minutes to talk amongst themselves about the common interest/opinion they chose.

When to use it: This is a good introductory activity for bigger groups!

WELL-OILED MACHINE (ALSO CALLED "PARTS OF A MACHINE")

Setup: You'll want enough room around for everyone to be moving!

How it works: One volunteer (or facilitator!) begins building a human "machine" by standing in the center or on a stage and making a repetitive motion and corresponding repetitive sound.

One at a time, group members add on to the machine by approaching the existing machine "parts" (people) and adding a new motion and sound to the mix. Participants are encouraged to make all different kinds of movements and sounds and position themselves in different ways, at different levels. Participants are discouraged from touching other people.

At the close of the exercise, facilitator can either invite the machine to slowly shut down for the night or invite people to "peel off" one at a time in the opposite order that they added themselves in the first time around (last person who joined the machine would be the first to peel off).

Variations: The facilitator can invite participants to create the machine in response to a certain prompt. For example, show a machine that makes dreams, or create a happy machine or a stressed machine. The facilitator can also invite an existing group that works together to create a machine that shows how they work together.

Once the machine has been created, the facilitator can give prompts to the "machine" as a whole, such as:

- Speed up production
- Slow down production
- React as though a cog has gotten stuck and jammed up the works

When to use it: This builds a team's ability to take action together fluidly, and reflects on the team's response to a prompt. This is a good activity to run after an initial meeting or two to build collaboration.

AFFINITY FLOCKING

Setup: Invite people to stand anywhere at the start of the game.

How it works: Give a series of prompts for which, each time, people in the room should find folks who have the same or a similar answer to them for a given question.

Sample prompts:

- Find people who have the same favorite season as you.
- Find people who have the same favorite color as you.
- Find people who have the same number of siblings as you.
- Find people who have the same favorite amusement park attraction as you.

As people gather in each group, invite them to share with the full room about their response. For example, you can ask the season groups to say which season they are and explain why they think it's the best season.

When to use it: This game works well for a large group of 25 people or more.

UNCOMMON COMMONALITIES

Setup: Have enough room so that people can spread out! Break people into groups of 3-4.

How it works: Give groups 5 minutes to come up with the most unusual commonality that they can come up with for all members of the group.

- Example: all of you have met a celebrity and talked with them
- Example: all of you have a grandparent who lives in North Carolina

Invite all groups to share out what they came up with! Celebrate the group with the most unusual commonality.

When to use it: This is a quick activity that you can use for any groups of 3+ participants!

WAGON WHEEL

Setup: Divide participants into two groups: an inner circle (which faces outward) and an outer circle (which faces inward).

- Number off 1-2 - create an inside circle (1's) and an outside circle (2's)
- Make sure that every 1 is partnered with a 2

How it works: Each partnership will have 1 min (30 seconds each) to answer a question. When the chime is sounded, the inner or outer circle will rotate to a new partner. Some possible questions include:

- If you could go anywhere in the world, where would you go and why?
- If you were given $10,000, what would you spend it on and why?
- If you could watch your favorite movie now, what would it be?
- What's the weirdest thing you've ever eaten?
- If you could wish one thing to come true this year, what would it be?
- What's your favorite thing to do in the summer?
- If you could have any kind of pet, what would you have and why?
- If you were an animal, what would you be and why?
- If you had to give up one of your senses (hearing, seeing, feeling, smelling, tasting) which would it be and why?
- If you could do your dream job 10 years from now, what would it be and why?
- If you had to be allergic to something, what would it be and why?
- If money and time was no object, what would you be doing right now?
- If you could eat your favorite food now, what would it be?
- If you could learn any skill, what would it be?
- If you were sent to live on a space station for three months and only allowed to bring three personal items with you, what would they be?

Pose a question for participants to discuss with the person facing them. Give the first person 1 minute to respond. Give the second person 1 minute to respond. Before the next question, the inner circle stays in place while the outer circle shifts one to the right.

When to use it: This is best for large groups with a lot of time!

PB & JELLY

Set Up: Make sure you have an area large enough for participants to move freely. The facilitator will need to prepare slips of paper with word associations (see below) and have tape that will hold paper to clothing.

The facilitator should select word pairs such as “peanut butter and jelly”, “ham and eggs”, “paper and pencil”, “Batman and Robin”, etc. and write the words on separate pieces of paper.

How it works: The facilitator should give a piece of paper with one half of a word association on it to each participant and ask them to hold it in front of them. Explain to the participants they will be pairing off by finding the other half of their word association.

The participants are then told to find the other word that complements their words. They may ask each other what their own word is and ask for help around pairings.

Once the pairs have been made, the pairs then are given a few minutes to learn one thing they have in common and one thing that is different (excluding where you currently go to school or live!) The facilitator should participate in a pair if the group has an odd number. If the group is evenly paired, the facilitator should join a pair and participate in the discussion of that group.

When to use it: This is a great activity to get any size group of participants familiar with each other on an individual level!

GROUP JUGGLING

Setup: For this game, you’ll need a small object that’s easy to toss across a circle, like a bean bag or a Koosh.

How it works: To begin, everyone should stand in a circle with a couple of feet in between each person. The facilitator tosses the object to someone across the circle, saying their name as they do so to get their attention. That person then tosses to a new person, saying their name as they toss. This continues until everyone has had the ball and the last person tosses it back to the facilitator, calling their name as they do so.

Once that pattern is established, the group repeats it, aiming to get faster each time. The facilitator or an observer should time the group on a stopwatch.

To add dimension to this and make it a teambuilding challenge as well as a way to learn names, the facilitator can invite the group to set a goal for how fast they think they can go and test it. The facilitator might also invite the group to pause at some point and discuss whether they’d like to try a new strategy.

When to use it: This is a good name game for small groups who are just getting to know each other.

BLANKET NAME GAME

Setup: You'll need a blanket or flat sheet big enough to hide a person head to toe.

How it works: Split the group into two teams. Two people hold up a blanket as a barrier between the two teams. It is important that they can't see each other. In each round, one person from each team stands on the other side of the blanket. The people holding the blanket drop it and the two people facing each other race to say the other person's name first. This can be done just for fun, or as a competition where teams rack up points.

TEAM TALLY

Setup: Divide the group into smaller teams (4-5 people is a good target number and it helps to try to make sure all teams are the same size). Give each team a copy of the Team Tally sheet (available on page 132) and a pen, but ask them not to look until you say go!

How it works: Let teams know that you will give them 7 minutes to score as many points as possible by following the prompts on the sheet.

When time is up, invite teams to quickly add up their points. Invite teams to stand if not already standing. Auction-style, begin inviting teams to stay standing if they have a certain number of points. For example, begin with inviting teams to stay standing if they have 50 points, then go up in 10-15 point increments from there, until there is just one team standing.

Note: Adapt the score sheet for various groups as needed to make sure the prompts work well for them.

When to use it: This game works best with a larger group, or at least 12 people.

HUMAN BINGO

Setup: You'll need a copy of the Human Bingo scorecard (see page 133) and a pen/pencil for every participant.

How it works: Hand out the Human Bingo scorecard, one to each participant. All participants (leaders included!) walk around and have other participants sign the box on the scorecard if they can answer yes to that question. Limit each person to signing two squares per bingo card, to encourage mingling. Keep going until time is up. Cheer for all bingos (a row or column of boxes signed).

When to use it: Great game for any group! Can be used as an icebreaker.

PEOPLE IN MY LIFE

Setup: You just need some people to participate in this one!

How it works: Pair everyone up into groups of 2. Ask each person in the group to take a minute to tell about the person in their life who has had the most positive influence. Tell participants that it's not necessary to name this influential person, but please to briefly share how and why the person influenced their lives.

Optionally, you can have people share out something that their partner said about their positive influence.

When to use it: This activity works best once the group has had a chance to get to know each other. It is a good choice because it allows participants to decide how much they want to share with the group.

QUICK LINE-UPS

Setup: Have participants stand in a line. Designate one end of the line as the "smallest" end and the other as the "largest" end

How it works: Have the group arrange themselves in line by birthday (smallest number to largest number). Have them do this without talking. Next, have them rearrange the line by the last two digits of their phone number (if everyone has a phone) or shoe size, this time without talking or using their hands to indicate numbers. (You can ask them to put their hands behind their backs or in their pockets.)

If your group is particularly trusting and caring with one another, give each person the name of an animal/critter (e.g., cat, horse, monkey, owl, snake, etc.) and have them keep these names secret. Next, tell them to rearrange the line from the smallest animal to the largest with their eyes closed and only making the sound of the animal.

- For the eyes closed version of the game, make sure you emphasize safety issues: take small steps, arms folded at chest height as bumpers, peeking is okay if needed. (You want everyone to be comfortable doing this!) Also, you as the facilitator should watch and make sure there are no accidents or collisions.

When the activity is completed, ask participants how they felt as they solved problems. What did they do well as a group? How can they bring these same skills into their work?

When to use it: This is a fun game for a group that has made initial introductions and spent some time together, but would benefit from some team building.

WHO AM I?

Setup: You'll need a small pieces of paper, one for each participant. Before the game, write the name of a famous person on each piece of paper. Each person can be contemporary or historical, real or fictional, but they should all be names your participants will know. You'll also need some tape.

How it works: Tape one piece of paper onto the back of each participant. Let the group mingle. Participants are allowed to ask each other yes/no questions about the names on their backs, with the goal of figuring out "Who am I?" They ask each other questions like "Am I on television?" "Am I American?" "Am I fictional?" and so on. Keep the game going until everyone has identified him or herself.

When to use it: This game gets group members up, moving and talking to one another, without demanding any sharing of personal information. It can be done any time after the initial introductions.

MY AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Setup: Ask each person in the group to share what title she would give to her autobiography, and why she would choose this title. Give the group a few minutes to think before sharing.

Some examples, to get people thinking: Born Standing Up (Steve Martin), The Audacity of Hope (Barak Obama), Surprised by Joy (C.S. Lewis), Going Rogue (Sarah Palin), Bossypants (Tina Fey).

When to use it: This activity works best after the group has had the chance to get to know each other a little. Some group members may be more willing to share than others; try to make the space as safe as possible so everyone can share as much as desired.

BLINDFOLD TOUR

Setup: Enough blindfolds for at least half of the group.

How it works: Divide the group into pairs, each pair with one blindfold. One member of each pair dons the blindfold. The sighted partner then leads the blindfolded partner on a brief "tour" around the room, giving verbal instructions about how to get around obstacles and what part of the room they're in. The pair then switches roles and repeats the activity.

After the activity is over, talk about differences in perspective and trust. How did the two partners' descriptions of the room differ? Did the blindfolded person learn anything new about the room from the tour? How easy was it to trust the sighted partner to get past obstacles?

When to use it: Because this game relies on trust within the group, it's best played only after a group has bonded.