

The Art of Breaking the Ice (Or . . . Six Tips for Leading Successful Icebreakers)

By: Michael Harper

You've been there, right? In charge of giving a presentation, leading a class, or speaking at an orientation. You've got your content ready to go, but the success of the presentation depends on how each participant receives the information. Though you can't control how the content is received, you can prepare your audience to receive it.

A well-designed icebreaker can set a presenter up for amazing results. You get the participants' attention, pique their interest, and they're ready to engage your content. A not-so-good icebreaker can be disastrous. Participants suddenly remember that they need to go to the bathroom, make an "important" phone call, or, even worse, stare out the window.

Follow these six tips to insure that your icebreakers lead to engagement instead of resentment:

1. Identify the Ice

Icebreakers are group activities that reduce anxiety and tension. This means that the first step to success is identifying the ice. As you consider your group, what might cause anxiety and tension when they come together? For some groups, anxiety could come from people not knowing each other. If a diverse group is gathered, the perceived differences among the participants could be creating the anxiety. Tension could be present if the session is required and participants would rather be anywhere else at that moment.

2. Focus More on Melting than Breaking

Leading icebreakers is an art. You're designing and leading an experience that moves people from anxiety and disengagement into comfort and engagement. This can't be done with the sharp point of an icepick. Instead, reframe the experience as an opportunity to melt the ice that you identified earlier and visualize the needle slowly moving from disengagement to engagement. The amount of "heat" needed to melt the ice will depend on the needs of your group. This could be one well-crafted activity or a series of activities that move the needle more slowly. You'll need to begin with low-risk, innocuous activities and questions and move intentionally towards higher-risk, engaging activities and questions.

3. Beware of Imposters

A quick Internet search will equip you with plenty of ideas for activities. As you select the activities, beware that the term *icebreaker* is often incorrectly used for all kinds of group activities including energizers (activities that ignite energy in the group) and learning games (activities that engage content). Stick with activities that reduce anxiety and tension. If the activity requires participants to put on blindfolds and yell at the top

of their lungs, you can bet that people will be diving for their cellphones hoping that there's a crisis back at the office that needs their immediate attention.

4. Design with Your Context In Mind

As you design an experience that moves the needle from disengagement to engagement, consider your context. Just because you thought an activity was fun at the last meeting you attended, doesn't mean that the activity will work with the group you're leading next week. How much time and space will you have? How big is the group and how well do they know each other? What types of people will be present in the group and what dynamics will the various personalities create? How energetic will the group be? And, perhaps most importantly, what activities have they done before? (There's nothing worse than putting energy into a perfect experience and then learning that the group did something similar at their last meeting.)

5. Lead with Intention

Anyone who has led an icebreaker knows what gets triggered when the icebreaker is announced—the heartfelt, collective groan of the meeting participants. It's almost as if some people are programmed to make this sound when asked to do anything except sit attentively. The groan is evidence of tension or anxiety in the room. As a leader, this is your moment to shine. By staying positive, giving clear instructions, and leading with energy, you'll gain the respect of the crowd. They'll quickly understand that you're there to help them and that the activities will create a better meeting experience for them.

5. Be Flexible and Keep It Simple

Successful ice melting requires that you have a few activities prepped and ready. If the group takes longer to melt, you may need to stick longer with low-risk activities and questions. If the group has trouble talking with each other, you may need to throw in a silent activity that lets them use their hands. Once you have a collection of activities that you feel comfortable leading, you'll know when to use a particular. In all cases, you'll need to keep everything simple. When there's anxiety and tension in the room, participants won't be able to engage more than one instruction at a time. Complicated activities will just add to the anxiety.

6. Be Super Sensitive

Moving the needle towards engagement requires that you put yourself in the shoes of each person in the room. Consider the needs of each person. Telling a partner about a favorite pizza topping would be painful for someone who has struggled with an eating disorder. Comparing yourself to a superhero could be problematic since the majority of superheroes are heterosexual white men. Remember, your goal is to reduce anxiety and not to create it.

By sticking with the metaphor of frozen water, just think of where your group will end up after your successful ice melting! The group arrives as ice that is unable to move. With your careful melting, however, the frozen water becomes fluid and begins to move

and fill the room. Once the ice is completely melted, the water holds the power to do amazing things. Water molecules in motion together carve out beautiful canyons, power turbines that create electricity for millions of homes, and provide life for the world.

Michael Harper is the managing director and lead facilitator at WorkShop, the Creative Workplace, in the Butchertown neighborhood of Louisville. He ignites passion and purpose through creative, custom-designed programs and creative meeting space. With a master's in teaching, Michael has twenty years of experience facilitating groups, leading strategic planning sessions, designing meetings, and empowering teams achieve their goals.