

ICEBREAKERS & ENERGIZERS

/ Set the tone for active contribution and engagement by all participants /

WHAT ARE ICEBREAKERS, AND WHY SHOULD I USE THEM?

Every event or workshop has participants, but often they don't participate actively enough. Sometimes this is because the event has too many presentations, with 'participants' being put into the role of passive listeners for the most part. But sometimes an event may have plenty of opportunities for participation, but it may start off on the wrong foot with a lengthy speech or 'keynote'. This can have a negative effect on the level of participation. Experienced event facilitators have observed that the first couple of sessions often set the tone for the remainder of an event; if these sessions are non-participatory, then a non-participatory tone is set for the event, and participants will usually behave accordingly.

Hence the value of icebreakers, which are informal activities and exercises to help people get to know each other quickly, and start communicating and connecting early in a meeting or workshop. Icebreakers are powerful tools to set the tone for participation, and encourage those at the event to play active, contributing roles.

Icebreakers help establish connections quickly and informally. This sense of connectedness and free communication will help the group achieve the work-related or learning objectives of the event. Icebreakers are especially useful when participants are from diverse cultural, ethnic or organizational backgrounds. When used correctly, icebreakers can also energize the group, highlight participants' particular strengths and subtly introduce themes to be explored later in the event.

The following effective icebreakers are described in detail below; the last two are the quickest and most informal:

- A. Speed Dating (Speed Networking)**
- B. Four Quadrants**
- C. Portrait of My Job**
- D. River of Life**

- E. Walking Billboard**
- F. Mistaken Identity**
- G. What Do They Like?**

There are many other icebreakers not covered here, which you can learn about from the references listed at the end of this document.

A. Speed Dating (Speed Networking)

The Speed Dating icebreaker is best used in meetings or workshops where most people don't know each other. It enables each meeting participant to meet a large number of other participants in a relatively short time. A structured format helps eliminate awkwardness: Participants prepare 1-minute 'elevator speeches' about themselves, then exchange introductions through a simple rotation process.

REQUIREMENTS:

- *Facilitator*
- *Room with large empty space (no chairs or tables)*
- *Alarm clock/ bell / other audible signal*
- *A4 paper and pens for participants*
- *20 - 30 participants*
- *30 - 40 minutes*



WHEN AND WHY TO USE

Speed dating/ networking is best used in meetings or workshops where most people don't know each other. Using a structured setting and pre-assigned questions, this activity eliminates the awkwardness of starting a conversation cold. This way, participants are able to focus on actually getting to know the person in front of them, without feeling nervous.

Using a structured format, participants are given approximately one minute to introduce themselves to others.



HOW TO APPLY

Plan in advance

1. Ensure you understand all the steps below. Then briefly explain the Speed Dating concept to participants.

2. Ask each person to come up with a one-minute 'elevator pitch': an informal verbal introduction to themselves and their work. Stipulate that each person's elevator pitch should include a funny/ memorable snippet of information about themselves, and that it should take no more than one minute to deliver. You can also ask them to mention, in 1 line only, how they are connected to

the theme of the event/workshop. Provide A4 paper, and give participants 5 minutes to jot down their pitches.

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3. In the room's empty space, have the participants form two concentric circles of equal number: an inner circle facing outwards, and an outer circle facing inwards. Each participant should now have a partner in front of them.

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4. Let the introductions begin: Each participant in the outer circle delivers their personal pitch to their partner in the inner circle. Then after one minute the inner circle partner does likewise.

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5. Keep time. After 2 minutes, ring the bell (or other clearly audible signal; you will have to be heard over the sound of all participants talking). Instruct participants in the outer circle to move to the right and stop in front of the next person in the inner circle.

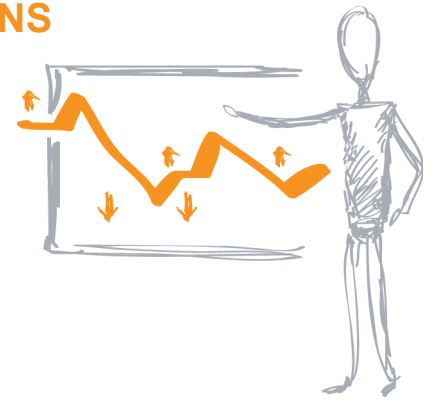
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6. The introductions begin again. The process is repeated until everyone in the outer circle has spoken to everyone in the inner circle.

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Tip: In traditional or conservative settings, where 'dating' is taboo, call this tool Speed Networking.

VARIATIONS



▲ **Questions:** Pose a couple of questions to the group; the answers will be delivered by participants to each other, by way of introduction, as they interact in the two concentric rings. The questions can be serious (e.g. 'What project has given you the most satisfaction to work on?'), humorous (e.g. 'What was your favourite joke as a child?') or connected to the workshop theme (e.g. 'What part of the event (workshop) are you looking forward to most?'). Have the outer ring rotate as described above, until everyone in the outer circle has spoken to everyone in the inner one.

▲ **Large groups:** In order not to exceed most people's information threshold, the suggested maximum number of participants in the usual Speed Dating is 30 (15 introductions in 30 minutes). If you have more than 30 people, form 2 (or more) sets of 2 circles each, an outer and an inner, that work just as described above. With 2 or more sets of circles, it is easiest if there is one facilitator per set. Keep some distance between multiple concurrent Speed Dating sessions, or even hold them in separate rooms, in order to limit the noise levels.

B. Four Quadrants

An active exercise that keeps people on their feet, Four Quadrants is best used in large groups as an initial icebreaker, a means of gradually introducing event themes and topics, or as an after-lunch energizer.

REQUIREMENTS:

- *Facilitator*
- *4 flipchart sheets*
- *30 or more participants*
- *30 minutes*
- *Room: ideally empty, or with plenty of room for people to move around and gather in corners.*

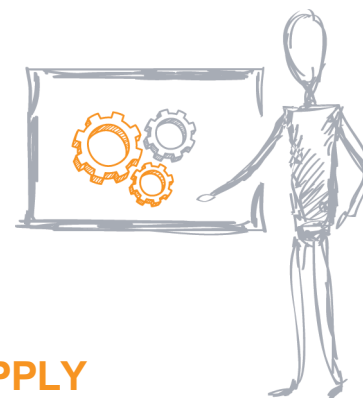


WHEN AND WHY TO USE

It can be difficult to mobilize the energy of a large group of participants who don't know each other well, especially when you don't have much time in your event schedule. Four Quadrants is ideal for these situations. By allowing participants to group themselves according to their responses to simple ideas or statements, it gives them an opportunity to identify with others in an easy way, even if they come from very different backgrounds.

Normally Four Quadrants begins with participants responding to common leisure or work activities. Participants must choose from among four standard responses, ranging from very positive to negative, hence the 'Four

Quadrants'. By progressing gradually to statements about workshop themes or topics, these can be introduced in a subtle way, and gauge participant interest levels and degree of experience. The dynamic nature of Four Quadrants also makes it a great energizer before embarking on long sessions.



HOW TO APPLY

- 1. Before the event: Decide on the four standard responses you would like participants to use in the exercise.** These can be any four words covering a spectrum from the most positive to the negative, for example: Passion / Like / Tolerate / Dislike.

Then create a list of up to 5-6 phrases or statements for participants to respond to. Each should be short and neither too serious nor obscure, e.g., 'watching sci-fi movies', 'singing', 'writing reports', 'talking to donors', 'social media', 'spicy food', etc. Stick to simple things that bring out strong reactions from people in a fun way, but avoid picking anything too political or polarizing. If you wish, you can also work in some of the basic themes from your event. Keep these as simple as you can: the purpose is simply to introduce basic ideas, not complex questions. Put these in the latter part of your list, for use near the end of the exercise.

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2. When you are ready to begin, write the response words on four flipchart sheets and post each one in one of the four corners of the room. These are the four quadrants.

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3. Instruct participants to stand in the middle of the room. Read out a phrase from your pre-determined list, starting with something light-hearted. Ask participants to move to the quadrant, from most positive to negative, that best describes their response to the phrase.

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4. Once participants have settled in their respective quadrants, select the quadrant with the fewest people in it, and ask those participants to share their thoughts on why they made their choice. Then ask volunteers from each of the other quadrants to share their thoughts. Highlight the similarities or differences among participants. The level of probing can be as light or as in-depth as you wish.

You can also ask each person to talk to at least two other participants in the same quadrant, to share why they feel the same way about the particular phrase. In large groups this will inspire a lot of conversations and energy.

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5. Continue this process with additional phrases and statements from your list, first the light-hearted or humorous ones, then move gradually into those that are related to the event's theme. The probing and discussions around work-related phrases will help you assess the comfort level, interest and experience participants may have with a particular topic.

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C. Portrait of My Job

This icebreaker is especially suitable for events involving participants from different parts of the same organization. The drawing of 'portraits' – each illustrating a participant's view of the communications and relationships necessary to do their job – gives participants a chance to communicate visually. The small group discussion of the portraits promotes interpersonal connection and builds empathy.

REQUIREMENTS:

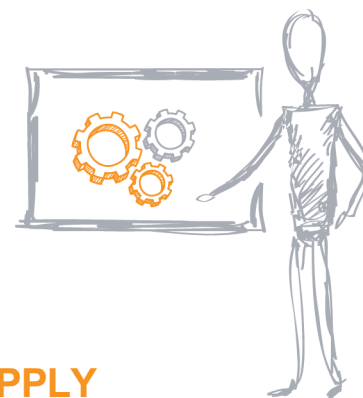
- *Facilitator*
- *Flipchart/ A4 paper (one sheet for each participant)*
- *Marker pens (several colours per participant)*
- *10- 30 participants*
- *45 minutes*



WHEN AND WHY TO USE

One way of strengthening connectedness and communication among meeting participants is to help them understand what it takes for others to do their jobs. This can be especially useful when participants are in the same organization, but in different departments or locations. Participants will recognize commonalities (“I work with that person also!”) and will get some surprises (“I didn’t realize you had to coordinate with so many people”). This in turn will help create a sense of empathy and appreciation for the work that others do, and will open a communication channel that can later be used to discuss common issues and exchange solutions.

This exercise is not limited to those from only one organization; participants from different organizations can also find it stimulating, as long as there are at least some common elements in the way they work. The use of drawing, instead of dry lists of names and roles, can be a refreshing change of pace for participants.



HOW TO APPLY

1. Before the event: Prepare a portrait as an example to show participants at the session, and to become familiar with the process. This may be your own portrait, or – if your role and work are unfamiliar to meeting participants – it may be a fictitious one. Using one sheet of paper

(A4 or flipchart size, whichever you will use at the session – flipchart is preferred due to its larger size), sketch a very quick and small image/symbol of yourself (or your fictitious subject) in the middle. Then, around your image, draw images/ symbol representations of key persons you communicate with in order to do your work. Put the ones you work most closely with closest to the image that represents you. Use arrows to show the direction of the information flow; some arrows will be double-headed to show that information flows in both directions, while others will point in one direction only.

2. When you are ready to begin: Ask participants to reflect on their jobs for 5 minutes, and think about their place in the organization, how they communicate within their own teams and with other departments, and how they get their work done.

3. Provide participants with one sheet each of either A4 or flipchart paper. Summarize the instructions for drawing a portrait of their job, as in #1 above, and show them the example prepared earlier. Let them know that they can use different symbols for persons or processes if they wish; the key is to allow a bit of reflection and creativity. **Then give them 10 minutes to draw their own portraits.**

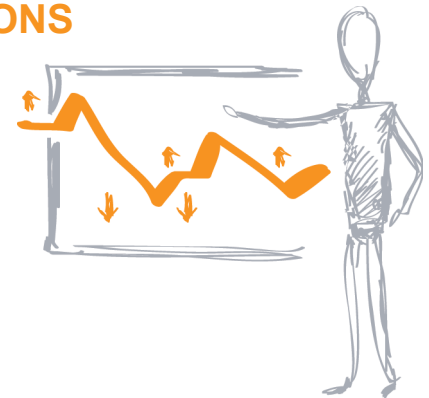
4. Once the portraits are completed, divide participants into small groups of 4-5 persons. Each group member has no more than 2-3 minutes to present and describe their portrait to the others in their group. Encourage group members to ask short questions to learn more,

e.g. ‘How do others perceive you at work?’, ‘Who is your boss’ boss and how do they fit in?’, or whatever relevant questions occur to them. This may take 20-30 minutes in total.

Once can also ask each person to talk to at least two other participants in the same quadrant, to share why they feel the same way about the particular phrase. In large groups this will inspire a lot of conversations and energy.

5. To wrap up, regroup in plenary and ask for one or two volunteers to share their insights on the activity.

VARIATIONS



This activity can be used as a standalone icebreaker. It can also be used as a starting point for subsequent sessions, especially if there is a specific challenge related to work processes, internal communication or networking that is being explored at your event. Or, instead of portraits of an individual, participants could prepare portraits of the work of a particular unit or department.

D. River of Life

Each participant in this exercise creates a graphic representation of their life, symbolized by a river and surrounding landscapes, and describes it in a small group setting. The River of Life is particularly useful for team building among individuals who don't know each other well.

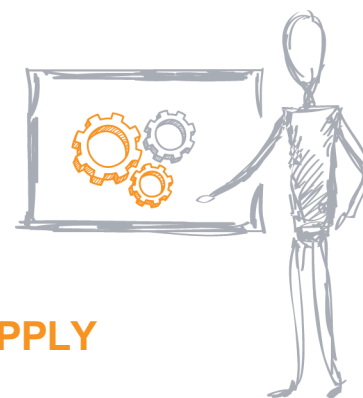
REQUIREMENTS:

- *Facilitator*
- *Flipchart paper (one sheet for each participant)*
- *Colour marker pens*
- *Optional: Colour cards, scissors, glue, masking tape*
- *10- 30 participants*
- *45- 60 minutes*



WHEN AND WHY TO USE

In the River of Life, each participant creates a reflective individual drawing that highlights milestones, challenges and celebrations in their life. The process of sharing these highlights in a group encourages group members to bond with one another, laying a basis for improved group dynamics and promoting increased effectiveness in working together as a team. Some of the power of this exercise comes from the use of imagery, which can often be more effective than words.



HOW TO APPLY

1. Before the event: Draw an example River of Life. Imagine your life as a river starting at birth and flowing along the course of your life. Mark the milestones in the form of boats (things that helped you), trees (major achievements) and rocks (challenges). You can enrich the illustration with a landscape surrounding the river that depicts the growth experiences and offers more detail about the milestones, achievements and challenges that shaped the present.

2. When you are ready to begin: Give each participant one sheet of flipchart paper, and

ensure there are sufficient colour marker pens available (and, if so inclined, colour cards and scissors for cutting out shapes). Describe what is needed as per #1 above, and show them the pre-drawn example to guide them. **Allow 15 - 30 minutes to complete the drawing.**

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3. Once each participant has drawn their River of Life, organize them into groups of 4 - 5 and ask each person to share the highlights of their own River with their group, in about 2 - 3 minutes. The group presentations should take about 15 – 20 minutes in total.

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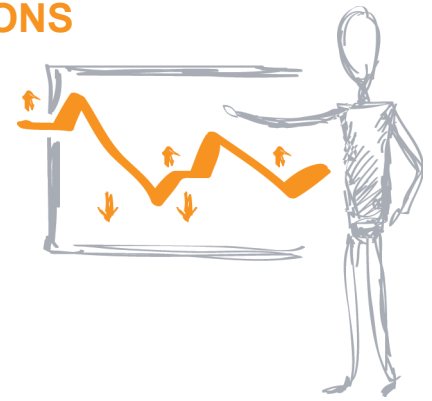
4. Ask participants to hang their River of Life drawings on a wall or pin board at the back of the room, creating a mini-gallery for others to view later.

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5. End the session in plenary: Ask 2 -3 volunteers to share their insights on the activity. Ask people to identify some of the similarities they noticed in the drawings. Did anything stand out? Were there similarities among the group members? .

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VARIATIONS



▲ **Working in pairs:** Participants pair off, and each partner creates a River of Life illustration for the other person, by asking relevant questions and interpreting the answers visually. Ensure that partners allocate the available time equally so that each will have an illustration prepared by the other (e.g., 15 min for each partner and illustration). Conclude with short presentations in plenary: Each person presents their partner's life using the illustration they drew.

E. Walking Billboard

This is an informal way to open a meeting. Participants prepare and wear a personal 'billboard': a sheet of flipchart paper with their name and answers to interesting questions about themselves. They then mingle for a short time; the billboards help catalyse conversations.

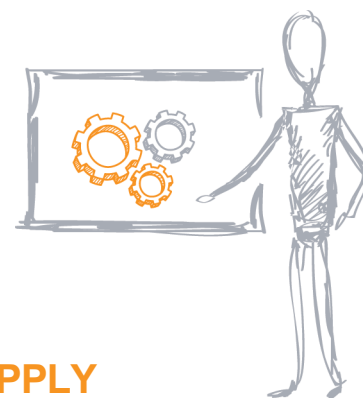
REQUIREMENTS:

- *Facilitator*
- *Flipchart paper (one sheet per participant)*
- *Colour marker pens*
- *15- 40 participants*
- *30 minutes*



WHEN AND WHY TO USE

The Walking Billboard is best used at the beginning of a meeting or workshop. Participants can converse with previously unknown persons more easily thanks to the personal responses (to previously selected, common questions) on the billboards. This exercise strikes a note of informality and, with the paper billboard covering participants' outfits and name tags, helps even out implied hierarchies and cultural barriers.



HOW TO APPLY

1. Ask participants to propose questions that they would like to ask others at the event. Give them examples to begin with, e.g., 'What is your favourite book?', 'What movie did you see most recently?', 'What is your main area of work?', 'Where have you worked the longest in your life?', 'What is the source of your interest in the theme of this event?' etc. The key is to have a healthy mix of lighthearted and substantive (but short) questions.

2. Write the proposed questions on a flipchart, and stop once you have at least 8 - 10. Read out the list and have a vote (a quick show of hands) among participants as to which ones they would like to select. Choose 3 - 5 popular questions.

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3. Give each participant a sheet of flipchart paper and ask them to create attractive billboards using colour markers, clearly writing their names and their brief responses to the selected questions. Allow 5 minutes.

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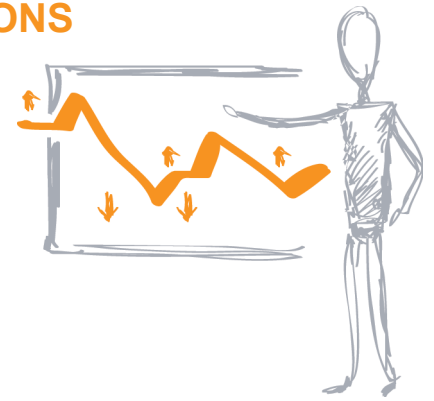
4. Have participants tape their billboards on their shoulders, covering the chest. Ask them to move around the room and mingle. Encourage everyone to talk to at least 5 people in 15 minutes, and to use the answers written on the billboards as conversation starters.

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5. Gather the group back in plenary and ask one or two volunteers to share their insights on the activity, whether they met anyone interesting, and any other highlights.

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VARIATIONS



▲ **Pre-determined questions:** Use this method when time is limited. Instead of asking participants to come up with questions, the facilitator provides 3 - 5 questions at the start of the activity. Participants prepare their billboards right away, and then mingle and converse.

F. Mistaken Identity

This is a quick and easy way for participants to get to know one other at the beginning of an event. When they first enter the meeting room at the start of the day, participants receive a name card with someone else's name on it, and are asked to mingle and find that person.

REQUIREMENTS:

- *Facilitator*
- *Large name cards with participant names prewritten in large letters*
- *20- 50 participants*
- *10- 15 minutes*



WHEN AND WHY TO USE

Use Mistaken Identity when you want a quick icebreaker that does not need much preparation. It can be used effectively in groups of up to around 50 people. As people walk around looking for the person whose name card they are holding, expect them to meet other people and make connections very quickly, with little effort.



HOW TO APPLY

- 1. Before the meeting, prepare name cards, writing participant's names on the cards prominently and legibly.**
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- 2. As participants arrive at the meeting room on the first day, hand out one name card to each (along with any other handouts), making sure no one gets their own name. Ask them to look for the person whose name tag they are holding.**
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- 3. Allow 10-15 minutes for this process, or end the exercise once everyone has found the person matching the name card they received.**

G. What Do They Like?

This informal icebreaker is easy to use at the start of an event. It challenges participants' memory in a fun way.

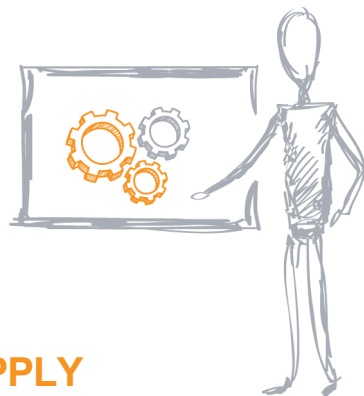
REQUIREMENTS:

- *Facilitator*
- *20- 30 participants*



WHEN AND WHY TO USE

Use this icebreaker when you are looking for something informal that requires no preparation. This method can be used with fewer than 20 participants, but larger numbers make it more challenging and therefore also more fun.



HOW TO APPLY

1. In plenary, have each participant introduce themselves with their name, title, where they are from, and then have them

mention something they like that begins with the first letter of their first name – the more memorable or unusual, the better. Thus a participant named Irene could say she likes ice cream, or one named Ajit could mention astronomy. Set the example by introducing yourself accordingly. Instruct everyone to pay attention as they will be tested later, then have all participants introduce themselves one by one.

2. After all introductions are complete, choose one participant and ask that person to introduce someone else – whom they haven't met before and who is not sitting next to them – using their first name and mentioning what they like. If they have trouble, ask the audience to help ("Does anyone know who this person is?"). The person introduced should then introduce another, and so on until everyone has been introduced by another person.

Step 2 can take place either immediately after step 1, or can be delayed, for example until after the opening presentation/remarks. Adding a delay raises the level of challenge and the fun.



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September 2015.

 UNICEF, 2015

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