Ice Breakers
Getting everyone to contribute at the start of a successful event
Source: MindTools.com

Ice Breakers can be an effective way of starting a training session or team-building event. As interactive and often fun sessions run before the main proceedings, they help people get to know each other and buy into the purpose of the event.

If an ice breaker session is well-designed and well-facilitated, it can really help get things off to a great start. By getting to know each other, getting to know the facilitators and learning about the objectives of the event, people can become more engaged in the proceedings and so contribute more effectively towards a successful outcome.

But have you ever been to an event when the ice breaker session went badly? Just as a great ice breaker session can smooth the way for a great event, so a bad ice breaker session can be a recipe for disaster. A bad ice breaker session is at best simply a waste of time, or worse an embarrassment for everyone involved.

As a facilitator, the secret of a successful icebreaking session is to keep it simple: Design the session with specific objectives in mind and make sure the session is appropriate and comfortable for everyone involved.

This article helps you think through the objectives of your ice breaker session, and then suggests various types of ice breaker you might use. As a facilitator, make sure your ice breakers are remembered for the right reasons – as a great start to a great event!

When to Use Icebreakers
As the name suggests, an ice breaker session is designed to “break the ice” at an event or meeting. The technique is often used when people who do not usually work together, or may not know each other at all, meet for a specific, common purpose.

Consider using an ice breaker when:
- Participants come from different backgrounds;
- People need to bond quickly so as to work towards a common goal;
- Your team is newly formed;
- The topics you are discussing are new or unfamiliar to many people involved; or
- As facilitator you need to get to know participants and have them know you better.

So What’s the “Ice”?  
When designing your ice breaker, think about the “ice” that needs to be broken.

If you are bringing together liked-minded people, the “ice” may simply reflect the fact that people have not yet met.

If you are bringing together people of different grades and levels in your organization for an open discussion, the “ice” may come from the difference in status between participants.

If you are bringing together people of different backgrounds, cultures and outlooks for work within your community, then the “ice” may come from people’s perceptions of each other.

You’ll need to handle these differences sensitively. Only focus on what’s important to your event. (Remember, you want to break some ice for your event, not uncover the whole iceberg, or bring about world peace!)

And as you move on to design and facilitate the event, it’s always best to focus on similarities (rather than differences), such as a shared interest in the event’s outcome.
**Designing Your Icebreaker**

The key to a successful ice breaker is to make sure the ice breaker is specifically focused on meeting your objectives and appropriate to the group of people involved.

Once you have established what the “ice” is, the next step is to clarify the specific objectives for your ice breaker session.

For example, when meeting to solve problems at work, the ice breaker objectives may be:

“To establish a productive working environment for today’s event with good participation from everyone involved, irrespective of their level or job role in the organization.”

With clear objectives, you can start to design the session. Ask yourself questions about how you will meet your objectives. For example:

- “How will people become comfortable with contributing?
- “How will you establish a level playing field for people with different levels and jobs?
- “How will you create a common sense of purpose?...”

and so on.

These questions can be used as a check list once you have designed the ice breaker session:

“Will this ice breaker session help people feel comfortable… establish a level playing field… etc”

As a further check, you should also ask yourself how each person is likely to react to the session. Will participants feel comfortable? Will they feel the session is appropriate and worthwhile?

**Example Ice Breakers**

There are many types of ice breakers, each suited to different types of objectives. Here we look at a few of the more popular types of ice breakers and how they can be used.

**Introductory Ice Breakers**

Introductory ice breakers are used to introduce participants to each other and to facilitate conversation amongst the participants.

*The Little Known Fact:* Ask participants to share their name, department or role in the organization, length of service, and one little known fact about themselves.

This “little known fact” becomes a humanizing element that can help break down differences such as grade / status in future interaction.

*True or False:* Ask your participants to introduce themselves and make three or four statements about themselves, one of which is false. Now get the rest of the group to vote on which fact is false.

As well as getting to know each other as individuals, this ice breaker helps to start interaction within the group.

*Interviews:* Ask participants to get into twos. Each person then interviews his or her partner for a set time while paired up. When the group reconvenes, each person introduces their interviewee to the rest of the group.

*Problem Solvers:* Ask participants to work in small groups. Create a simple problem scenario for them to work on in a short time. Once the group have analyzed the problem and prepared their feedback, ask each group in turn to present their analysis and solutions to the wider group.
Tip:
Choose a fairly simple scenario that everyone can contribute to. The idea is not to solve a real problem but to “warm up” the group for further interaction or problem solving later in the event. The group will also learn each other’s styles of problem-solving and interaction.

Team-Building Ice Breakers
Team-building ice breakers are used to bring together individuals who are in the early stages of team building. This can help the people start working together more cohesively towards shared goals or plans.

The Human Web: This ice breaker focuses on how people in the group inter-relate and depend on each other.

The facilitator begins with a ball of yarn. Keeping one end, pass the ball to one of the participants, and the person to introduce him- or her-self and their role in the organization. Once this person has made their introduction, ask him or her to pass the ball of yarn on to another person in the group. The person handing over the ball must describe how he/she relates (or expects to relate) to the other person. The process continues until everyone is introduced.

To emphasis the interdependencies amongst the team, the facilitator then pulls on the starting thread and everyone’s hand should move.

Ball Challenge: This exercise creates a simple, timed challenge for the team to help focus on shared goals, and also encourages people to include other people.

The facilitator arranges the group in a circle and asks each person to throw the ball across the circle, first announcing his or her own name, and then announcing the name of the person to whom they are throwing the ball (the first few times, each person throws the ball to someone whose name they already know.) When every person in the group has thrown the ball at least once, it’s time to set the challenge – to pass the ball around all group members as quickly as possible. Time the process, then ask the group to beat that timing. As the challenge progresses, the team will improve their process, for example by standing closer together. And so the group will learn to work as a team.

Hope, Fears and Expectations: Best done when participants already have a good understanding of their challenge as a team. Group people into 2s or 3s, and ask people to discuss their expectations for the event or work ahead, then what they fears and their hopes. Gather the group’s response by collating 3-4 hopes, fears and expectation from pairing or threesome.

Topic exploration ice breakers
Topic exploration ice breakers can be used to explore the topic at the outset, or perhaps to change pace and re-energize people during the even.

Word association: This ice breaker helps people explore the breadth of the area under discussion. Generate a list of words related to the topic of your event or training. For example, in a health and safety workshop, ask participants what words or phrases come to mind relating to "hazardous materials". Participants may suggest: 'danger,' 'corrosive,' 'flammable,' 'warning,' 'skull and crossbones,' etc. Write all suggestions on the board, perhaps clustering by theme. You can use this opportunity to introduce essential terms and discuss the scope (what’s in and what’s out) of your training or event.

Burning questions: This ice breaker gives each person the opportunity to ask key questions they hope to cover in the event or training. Again you can use this opportunity to discuss key terminology and scope. Be sure to keep the questions and refer back to them as the event
progresses and concludes.

**Brainstorm:** Brainstorming can be used as an ice breaker or re-energizer during an event. If people are getting bogged down in the detail during problem solving, for example, you can change pace easily by running a quick-fire brainstorming session. If you are looking for answers to customer service problems, try brainstorming how to create problems rather than solve them. This can help people think creatively again and gives the group a boost when energy levels are flagging.