Icebreakers! The How, When & Why of Using!

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ICEBREAKERS SERVE THREE KEY PURPOSES FOR A PRESENTER:

First, icebreakers can be effective tools used to introduce participants to each other. Learning is a social activity that often puts the learner in an exposed position. Sometimes talking about personal issues is hard enough– talking about them in front of a group of total strangers is even harder. Icebreakers allow participants to find out a little about one another and to do so in a fun way and, therefore, make the experience and the learning a little less stressful. Icebreakers also encourage participants to bond and engage in collaboration.

Secondly, icebreakers energize the group. Icebreakers should be quick, interactive activities presented a few minutes at the start of the session to create energy within the group. They move participants from a passive, apprehensive state of mind into a positive, active one. The hardest part of many training sessions is overcoming the participants' initial inertia. Icebreakers get the group moving, thus allowing the presenter to engage them throughout the session. Icebreakers can also provide some direction for the session. Many icebreakers can be used to help participants focus upon and verbalize their goals for the session. A good facilitator will pay attention to the statements and try to steer the learning points around the participants' stated outcomes.

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Potential Issues When Using Icebreakers

As you would expect no one icebreaker is effective (or appropriate) for every setting and every participant. Some of the factors to be considered when selecting an icebreaker include:

PARTICIPANT NEEDS

The presenter should gauge the needs of the participants. Some icebreakers will work better with specific types of training evens. Choose icebreakers that naturally or readily segue into the training to follow. When covering sensitive subjects such as assertiveness or stress management, it might not be appropriate to start with a wild, active icebreaker. Also keep in mind the likely audience response to the icebreaker. There are a number of factors which impact the effectiveness and appropriateness of an icebreaker such as participant age, attitude, dress, etc.

GROUP SIZE

Large groups need more energetic icebreakers and, typically, more space. If you are asking the participants to speak out in front of a lot of people, asking them to disclose large amounts of personal detail is stressful, time consuming, and not very interesting for the other participants. Conversely asking three people to do an active, energetic ice-breaker is potentially embarrassing and inappropriate.

PHYSICAL LIMITATIONS OF GROUP

There are some excellent energizers and icebreakers that involve a certain amount of movement such as making human pyramids, human caterpillars, races across the tops of chairs, etc. Not everyone is capable of doing such activities, so it is important to make sure that you gauge the ability of the group beforehand.

VENUE

If you are running an ice-breaker in a lecture theatre, getting people to move about or stand in a circle could be difficult and potentially dangerous.

OWN CONGRUENCE

Ice-Breakers and energizers are all about getting the learners into a posture and attitude conducive to learning. It is therefore essential that the facilitator's body language and communication skills are positive and encouraging.