

TrainingBriefs

Choosing Icebreakers with a Purpose

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*In *TrainingBriefs*, MOSAICA uses the term *member* to refer to individuals (including members, volunteers, and participants) providing service in National Service programs.

National Service program staff, site supervisors, and trainers share responsibility for member training and development. *TrainingBriefs* provide these individuals with useful information and innovative ideas for training and development.

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Dan Balón is moving on!

Dan is sadly leaving MOSAICA's National Service Training and Development Project this month to pursue his Ph.D. in Education at the University of Maryland. He will also be training teaching assistants to help them learn interactive techniques. But, rest assured Dan will stay a part of the national service community, if time allows. MOSAICA thanks Dan for his contributions — including preparing many of these *TrainingBriefs* — and wishes him continued success in the future!



Effective training sessions require proper planning and interactive, experiential activities. Icebreakers and openers used at the start of a training session or before a new training topic help to set a positive atmosphere for member interaction and encourage interest in the overall training experience. Icebreakers can be modified into more lengthy teambuilding activities which promote a sense of cooperation and trust among members through the use of personal disclosure and/or interdependent tasks. However, icebreakers used as opening activities should be short, typically not taking more than ten minutes.

Trainers often choose an icebreaker only because it is a light, friendly start to a session. However, an icebreaker can also set the tone for the session's content and format, build momentum for the next training phase, build trainer credibility, and provide a feel for the group. An icebreaker encourages involvement of all participants, energizes the group, and builds cohesiveness and trust. An icebreaking activity plays an important role by introducing the training topic in a creative way; an icebreaker that has a clear purpose and is relevant to the training topic sparks member attention and lays the foundation for an effective session.

Look beyond the fun and enjoyment that an icebreaker provides members, and your planning will make a big difference for the training topic that follows. Below you will find some tips to help you select the best activity to "break the ice" for your training session.

Approach the selection of an icebreaker as if you were choosing a training technique or strategy — keep in mind important factors such as understanding the individual and group needs of your members, relating the activity to the training content and format, and knowing the limitations of your training location. Many trainers keep using the same icebreakers because they know only a few or the activities have succeeded with other groups.

Choose an icebreaker with specific training objectives in mind.

Pick an icebreaker that is inclusive of your members' diverse needs.

Choose an activity that is appropriate given numerous individual factors such as physical mobility, personal interest, skill level, and comfort with the activity's format. For example, a physically-rigorous outdoor activity may suit predominantly young members for an environmental restoration program; this activity would not be appropriate for a group with persons with physical disabilities or limited mobility. Consider instead an interactive or small group indoor icebreaker that achieves similar goals but does not limit member participation due to personal or physical needs.

Identify an activity that is appropriate for your group's stage of development.

Depending on a group's sense of team, the icebreaker can effectively serve different purposes. For example, when new members come together — at the start of the program year — or when a new member joins an established group, use an activity that helps members remember names, encourages them to learn about each others' backgrounds, and promotes full member participation. (See the

Name Game activity in this *TrainingBrief* for an example of this kind of icebreaker.) When group members have been together for a while, identify an activity that goes beyond name recognition and helps to build group relationships through the sharing of experiences.

Tie the icebreaker to the session topic. For example, use the icebreaker as a needs assessment tool to gauge the level of member experience or familiarity with the training topic. When conducting a training session on ethical issues in tutoring children, develop an icebreaker that initiates member discussion about their tutoring experiences or their viewpoints about various youth tutoring situations; member responses will provide useful information about what training areas need emphasis. Your members are mostly adult learners who seek practical information and skills they can apply to real-life situations (see *Starting Strong*, pp. 193–196). Consider the first activity as a “break the ice” opportunity to engage participants in the training topic. This can be very helpful when the topic is controversial or will generate emotionally-charged conversations. For example, if the session topic is diversity awareness, develop an activity that allows individuals to practice how to disclose experiences and opinions on low-risk subjects (e.g., cultural and historical origin of member names, whether one prefers one soft drink over another and why, etc.); members will then be prepared for taking greater risks in the training session. (See the Name Game activity variation in this *TrainingBrief* for an example).

Choose an activity that fits your training session design. An icebreaker can provide structure for activities later in the training agenda. For example, if you plan to use cooperative learning group roles — i.e., facilitator, recorder, reporter, observer, timekeeper — later in the session, identify icebreaker activities that will form the small groups of four to six participants that you need. (For information on cooperative learning groups, see *Starting Strong*, pp. 197–202.) An icebreaker also adds variety to the training experience. If you plan to use a large group format for the training session, identify an icebreaking activity that pairs members or facilitates interaction within the large group. (Also, see “Big Results from Small Groups,” *TrainingBrief* #3: October 1997.)

Identify an icebreaker that fits the training location. When planning a large group activity, make sure that there is ample room for members to move around comfortably or complete their instructions. Also, ensure that your training space has the appropriate furniture for the icebreaker. Small group activities may require moveable chairs and large enough tables to accommodate four to six members and their assigned tasks (e.g., drawing on newsprint). Some icebreakers may have particular lighting needs, such as a candle-lighting activity that asks members to share their perspectives. In other settings, an icebreaker may need “break-out” space (i.e., room for private conversation), such as in one-on-one personal interviews.

Icebreakers are an important part of an effective training session package. When you select an activity that is not only fun and interactive but also fits your desired training outcomes and needs, you and your members will see a positive difference!

ACTIVITY: Name Game

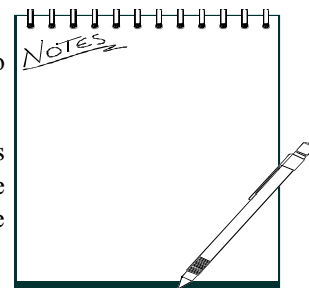
Objectives: To create a comfortable atmosphere. To build acquaintanceship among members meeting for the first time or to acquaint members with a new member joining a pre-established group. To encourage team building among members in a training session.

Instructions: Instruct members to write their full first name vertically on a piece of paper. Then have them write an adjective describing themselves that begins with each of the letters of their first name.

After everyone has completed their list of adjectives, give each member time to share their names and adjectives to the full group. The entire activity should not exceed 10 minutes.

Variation: Ask members to write their full names. Then ask how they received their names — have members think about the cultural and historical origins of their names as well as any stories behind how their names were chosen. Give members the option of using pens or crayons to draw symbols that represent the stories that describe how they were named. Have members spend two minutes sharing their names and stories to the full group.

Also, consider pairing members to conduct “interviews” about each other’s first names or full names. During group sharing, have members introduce their interview partners’ names and adjectives or stories with the large group.



Here are three resources on icebreakers that National Service staff may borrow from the National Service Resource Center. For more information, contact ETR Associates by phone at 1-800-860-2684 ext. 260, e-mail <jenniferr@etr.org> or website at <<http://www.etr.org/NSRC>>.

- ☛ *Diversity Icebreakers: A Guide for Diversity Trainers* by S. Myers and J. Lambert (Amherst Educational Publishing, Amherst, MA, 1994)
- ☛ *Icebreakers: A Sourcebook of Games, Exercises and Solutions* by K. Jones (Pfeiffer and Company, Erlanger, KY, 1991)
- ☛ *Warmups for Meeting Leaders* by S. Bianchi, J. Butler, and D. Richey (University Associates, San Diego, CA, 1990)