

How to write icebreakers

By

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Why use icebreakers?

Icebreakers have traditionally been used to start off a training session – to break the ice and get people in a receptive frame of mind for learning. They can also be used to energise a heavy or demanding session, or even as a filler if your course is running under time or to reinforce the learning.

Learners too are coming to expect more from their trainers – especially if you are an external consultant of any description. A good icebreaker adds a certain dash of panache, shows you know your stuff, and often a short, punchy activity will be the one learners remember.

Of course, there's no need to reinvent the wheel. A multitude of very good books and manuals full of icebreakers are already out there, and you can wade through them if you have the time. I have read some amazing books on icebreakers. Fenman² have some terrific ones on offer.

Why write your own?

I don't know about you, but when I look through icebreakers or energisers, I often re-write them, making changes here and there to suit my courses.

That got me thinking. If I'm taking 'off the peg' icebreakers and altering the material to fit my courses, maybe what I should be doing is writing my own tailored icebreakers to ensure a perfect fit. That's how, together with a friend, I began writing icebreakers.

A new style of icebreaker for the discerning learner

With discerning learners in mind, we knew that while icebreakers such as, 'If you were an animal, mineral or vegetable – what would you be?' definitely had their place, those learners were often expecting more. More worryingly, although the idea of this style of icebreaker is to get people talking while linking seamlessly to the course content, sometimes things go awry. For example:

“Okay, thanks Jeremy for your intro. So, you’re an aardvark. Great. Now, back to performance management...”

This is not necessarily wrong. It does, however, leave the trainer thinking, ‘Well, what should I do now he has told me he’s an aardvark?’ The learner wonders, ‘Now he knows I am an aardvark, where do I stand in the scheme of things? Am I a lesser person? Should I have been a hedgehog instead?’ It is all very perplexing.

I think that you get the point anyway.

How do I design a tailored icebreaker?

For me writing icebreakers is a kind of step by step process.

Step one – consists of that nagging feeling/doubt that really this course needs something to get it started with a bang! After an exhaustive search I still can’t find anything that quite fits. (This is an essential part for me as the frustration is a very positive force.)

Step two – I ask myself, ‘What exactly is the point of this course?’ I find it useful to look at objectives for the course and ask myself ‘What message or messages must they take from this course, and how can I get these messages into their heads in the first sixty minutes or less?’

For example, to write an icebreaker to use at the start of a coaching course, I write down all the principles and main things that I want to put across to delegates. The list might look something like this:

- GROW model
- Taking responsibility
- Managers role
- Coachee’s responsibility
- Building awareness

I ask myself what would put that across in a straightforward fashion?

Step three – I often find it best to leave it for subconscious brain to think about how to put the idea across.

For example, when I was writing ‘Grow your People’, I went to a garden centre and as I wondered around, saw some bulbs. It hit me that in order for the bulbs to grow they need to be planted and cared for. It seemed so obvious that I couldn’t wait to get back and write it up. You can see the end result below. I’ve also included a quick reference guide for the actual process of writing the icebreaker which is set out in the box below.

Process abridged

1. What are the objectives of the course?
2. What are the most important principles for learners to take away from the course?
3. Ask yourself 'What is it like? What is it similar to?'
4. If nothing comes to you, leave it to your subconscious to come up with something.
5. When you have your idea, play around with it. Try it out on people to see if it makes sense to them.
6. When you use it explain to people that it is symbolic of what you the course is about or it is metaphor for. This prevents the 'groan' effect when it seems as if you are asking them to do something silly.
7. Write clear instructions telling you what to do and say – follow them.
8. Be flexible when people interpret things differently to you. In fact, people are usually much more ready to go with it than you could have imagined.

Grow your people

Aim

To make the principles behind coaching memorable

Learning

Identify the barriers of a coach's role

Use the standard skills of a gardener to understand the principles behind coaching

Materials

Several cards, each one containing one of the following words: 'Seed', 'Earth', 'Water', 'Pot' and 'Sunshine.'

One pack of bulbs and flowerpots for everyone.

Plus, earth, water, newspaper, flipchart and small card

Trainer knowledge needed

An understanding of the fundamentals of coaching. Awareness of the GROW model desirable (see John Whitmore's Coaching for performance)

Process

1. Introduce the topic of coaching, giving particular emphasis to how individuals are responsible for their own development. The manager's role is to enable the person to grow by providing the right conditions, etc
2. Allow everyone to pick a seed of his or her choice. Discuss the merit of picking what seems to be the right one for them. Link to staff recruitment on how you choose what seems to be the best candidate at the time.
3. Ask everyone to plant the seed in one of the provided pots of earth and water it.
4. Split the groups into smaller groups and give them a different card each.
5. Give them five minutes to think, 'How are each of the different things I have just done symbolic of a manager's role?' Examples might be: a seed is like the member of staff – has potential but needs nurturing; Water is a regular thing a seed needs to grow, just like feedback and 1-1s are.
6. After five minutes, discuss in a large group and plot on flipchart. RE-iterate that coaching about the managing providing the right tools for growth – they can't **make** anything or anyone grow, only enable.

What's the point?

All answers are correct. However, you are hoping that they will discuss how a manager can only **enable** a member of staff to grow. The manager's job is to provide the right conditions for individuals to grow but ultimately, they could remain dormant for years for no apparent reason – just like a seed or bulb can.

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Let's try another one.

Here's how I applied the same process to create another icebreaker.

I wanted to introduce feedback as a session but wasn't sure how to do it. I would be using a 360 tool and wanted to get the delegates in the best frame of mind to receive their feedback from other members of the team.

Thinking about feedback, I remembered an expression Garry Platt³ once used. He called feedback 'the food of champions.'

This is an example of how an icebreaker can emerge from just 'free-wheeling' with your thoughts:

- Feedback is a good thing.
- Feedback is like a present or a gift.
- Sometimes you get presents that you don't want. (As a rather emaciated-looking seven year old I recall receiving a horrendously large pair of Y-fronts from a distant aunty. Not only would they have fit me, my brother, my two friends, their parents and their dog, the worst thing of all was that I had to be grateful!)
- So, if you get presents you don't want, you have two choices. Once you have thanked the present giver, you can choose to find something useful to do with the present or you can bin it. That is how it is with feedback.

To illustrate the point I decided to find a present I could give to people. It would then be up to them to decide whether to keep and use the gift or whether to bin it. I struck gold in a local pound stretcher shop where I found some pen holders. These had an adhesive backing to allow them to be stuck to walls, and clasped the pen with a plastic mouth. They were quite hideous and therefore perfect!

I wrapped up one pen holder per delegate and then, before receiving their feedback from 360 profiles, I gave them each their present.

Before allowing them to open the present I asked them what they thought was inside. Most replied quite excitedly, 'Oh, it's definitely chocolate.'

I asked, 'So how are you feeling about the possibility of opening the present then?' They said they were anxious to see what was inside. I told them to all open the present at the same time.

As they did so, you could see disappointment and confusion on their faces as they puzzled over what the item could be.

I asked them, 'how do you feel now.'

Reply, ' a bit let down/disappointed.'

I said, 'So it is not what you are expecting, but what could it be used for? Could it be of any use to you?'

As people started to work out what it was, some decided that they liked it. Others didn't really want it so discarded it.

I then brought them back to the course and asked them 'In what way does it relate to the feedback that you are about to receive?'

No surprise, their answers were along the lines of...'well, at first, I was a bit disappointed. It wasn't what I expected. Then with some thought, I realised it did have some use but ultimately, this time, it was not for me.' Feedback is exactly like that.

Now, as you read this, you may think it all sounds a bit cliché? I thought so too actually. However, this always goes down a storm and puts feedback into context.

Other examples I have used...

- ✓ Pass the parcel to introduce probing questions or culture (getting beneath the surface)
- ✓ Two walky-talkies set to different frequencies to illustrate the importance of signposting to get onto people's wavelength.

For every major point that you want to put across, why not think about how you could do so in a tailored icebreaker of your own?

Good luck.

References:

1. Alan Evans and Paul Tizzard, *The Icebreaker Pocketbook*, Management Pocketbooks, 2003.

2. Fenman Limited, Clive House, The Business Park, Ely, Cambridgeshire CB7 4EH. Tel: 01353 665533. www.fenman.co.uk

3. Garry Platt is a senior tutor at the Woodland Grange Management Centre in Leamington Spa. Garry also writes Training Journal's Netcheck column on a bi-monthly basis. He is also a regular and generous contributor to UK-HRD.

About the author

Paul Tizzard is an experienced, creative and enthusiastic former management consultant for Virgin Atlantic who has been independent since October 2001. Paul is Director of Inspirit Training Ltd, who specialise in coaching, facilitation, management and personal development. Inspirit Training Ltd work with a mixture of public and private companies delivering innovative and practical training solutions using their own original icebreakers to ensure the learning sticks! Paul is co-author of *Icebreakers* published by Management Pocketbooks.

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