

Breaking the ice

Penny Walker shares some tried and tested ways of generating a buzz at a meeting



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The house lights go down, the screen casts an eerie bluish light over the cavernous room and a hundred pairs of eyes glaze over as yet another speaker drones on, missing the point and patronising the audience. He (and it usually is a he) runs over, and the small amount of time scheduled for questions is pared to the bone. Asking a question feels like stepping into the lion's den, and only the bravest venture to do so.

The little audience participation that is allowed by the programme falls flat. Name badges are so small that you have to have 20/20 vision to read them. The chairs are laid out theatre style, so interaction between delegates is very limited. Or if table seating is used, the tables are so large that people can't hear what the person opposite them is saying.

Feedback forms show time and again that people enjoy the networking most – and they've only had break time to do this. They recognise that they can learn as much – if not more – from frank conversations with their peers as they can from lectures delivered by the star speakers.

How can you do it better?

We've all been at conferences like this. You may have been called on to organise:

- community forums
 - stakeholder meetings
 - training courses
 - staff meetings
 - policy updates
 - public or professional conferences
- How can you increase the chances of successful networking and encourage an interactive and participative approach?
- There are lots of ways – agenda design, room layout, lots of natural light, good fresh food, ditching all but the essential presentations'.

Breaking the ice

Here are some introductory exercises which help break the ice early on in a meeting, encouraging people to talk to each other as human beings.

Introductory ice breakers:

- What we have in common
- Human bingo
- Getting to know you

What we have in common

This is very quick and simple, works for groups of any size and doesn't require any special equipment or layout. Invite everyone to pair up with someone they don't know yet, and find out three things

that they have in common: one to do with their working life, one to do with their home life, and one to do with their life before the age of ten.

This can be achieved in minutes!

If you've got time, ask people to get into new pairs and repeat the exercise, but the things they have in common must be different from the first pairing.

You can repeat this three or four times.

There's no need to hear any feedback.

Human bingo

This exercise is lively and energetic, and you can tailor it very precisely to the topic of your meeting. It works best in groups of 10-30, and you need space for people to get up and move around to find each other.

Each person needs a bingo sheet, like the one in Figure 1 which was used for a workshop run by Growing Communities for people who were considering setting up their own veggie box scheme.

You can come up with your own questions which reflect the likely interests and situation of the participants, and are relevant to the topic. The questions need to be yes/no questions.

Everyone has their own copy of the handout, and goes around finding someone who can answer 'yes' to one of the questions. But watch out! They need to find a different name for each box.

You could introduce a competitive element, with a prize for the fastest completed sheet, but this isn't necessary: it's the conversations which matter.

Getting to know you

This icebreaker is particularly suitable when you have a very mixed group who are going to need to work together over a long period of time on something difficult – they need to feel comfortable with each other and connect at a very human level.

When I used it recently, I drew heavily on a set of questions from the On Q pack – you can order this on line.

Each person received a card with a different question and some instructions on it. The questions included things like:

- What film can you watch over and over again?
- What sound or noise do you love?
- How do you waste time?

You can come up with your own questions. They need to be personal but not intrusive.

The instructions invited people, over the break, to find at least three other people and ask them the 'getting to know you' question.

There was soon a great buzz in the room, as people had a ready made excuse to talk to each other and a question of their own to reply with, overcoming natural reticence and putting people on a more equal footing.

What's the benefit?

Introductions of this kind build up a sense of being part of a group, rather than a collection of delegates from organisations or from opposing factions: this is a useful prelude to decision-making. For example, committees and steering groups are often formed of people from a range of 'home' stakeholder organisations. They need to gel as a group, so that they can put the needs of the project they are steering ahead of their own organisation's needs. These kinds of ice breakers help induce a cooperative spirit, bringing 'the whole person' into the room.

With very diverse groups, they help people see both what they have in common, and the different experiences and perspectives which may lead to (valid) differences of view.

What are your favourite icebreakers and introductions exercises? ■

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'Some great examples were woven together in a single event run by WWF called Tasting the Future, see my blog www.iema.net/env/103/14

Figure 1: Example 'human bingo' handout

Box-scheme bingo: Find someone who can answer yes to these questions, and write their name in the box. You need to find a different name for each box!

Are you a member of the Growing Communities veg bag scheme?	Have you ever "picked your own"?	Did someone give you home-made food as a present last Christmas?	Do you prefer raspberries to strawberries?
Have you met Monty Don?	Do you compost your peelings?	Have you set up a business?	Have you been employed to harvest fruit/veg?
Do you know a great recipe for kale?	Have you ever grown runner beans?	Is there a bike shed at your workplace?	Have you ever eaten Ceylon spinach (it's a climber!)?





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