

Inclusion Starts With “Hello”:

An Exercise in Building an Inclusive Community

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Overview

How can you connect with people if you don't even get to “hello?” This activity starts the connection process that is so fundamental for building inclusion and a sense of organizational community.

Ideally, every team meeting should begin with “Hellos” to model and reinforce the importance of inclusive practices. This activity and its variants can be used as part of small or large group activities of almost any duration, including workgroup meetings, training or education sessions, even board meetings and client conferences.

Why Do It?

Because People Need Connection

People are social beings; they need community to thrive. People need to feel part of the organizational community to feel valued, connected and willing to give so much of themselves to their organizations and teams.

In recent years, creating inclusive communities inside organizations has become a critical business success factor. It's not unusual for people to work nine, 10, even

12 hours a day plus weekends and consider it a normal part of their job. For people to be able to sustain this kind of commitment for any length of time, they need to feel a special kind of bond with their workplace and co-workers.

If people are isolated from one another, that sense of community cannot develop. Saying “hello” is the most fundamental step toward overcoming isolation and establishing connection.

This activity grew out of a need to establish connections between isolated groups in one of the business world's first organizational diversity initiatives, conducted in 1972 at Connecticut General Life Insurance Company (now CIGNA). The challenge was to get white and black colleagues to interact in honest and authentic ways. For some whites, this “hello” activity was the first time they had ever touched a black person's hand. For all participants, it was the start of building contact and connection—looking someone in the eye and shaking her or his hand in a sincere manner.

Many of those original participants took this exercise with them when they moved to other organizations.

Today, the “Hellos” activity is used as standard practice in organizations in Europe, Australia, India, the Pacific Rim and throughout the United States.

Suggested Time

5-15 minutes or more, depending on the size of the group

Procedure

1. Use a room large enough for the people in the group to stand comfortably in a circle.
2. Explain the purpose and details of the activity. The following is a script that has been used very effectively:

“We are going to be involved in an easy, no-cost activity that addresses one of the most important issues in organizations today—creating an inclusive work environment.

You can't have an inclusive community without saying “hello” to people and having them feel recognized and acknowledged as individuals. Hellos don't show up on the bottom line, so they often get ignored; but when they get ignored too long, the bottom line suffers.

In busy offices, people are often more motivated to get to their email than to say “hello” to the people they see along the way. People on work teams often go directly to the task instead of greeting all the members of the team before getting started.

In many places, people who are new to the organization, or different from others in some way, get the fewest “hellos.” When they leave for more inviting organizations, it can cost hundreds of thousands of dollars to replace them.

Saying “hello” is a key step to creating a more inclusive environment. You might even consider it Step One.

3. Direct the group to follow these three steps for the hello activity:

Step One: Greet Everyone

Variation A: When all members of the group are assembled and ready to start the meeting, the facilitator introduces the activity and instructs people to form a circle without anything in their hands. Each person’s assignment is to move about the room and greet every person in the room, acknowledging each by—at the very least—making eye contact, saying each other’s names and shaking hands. Participants should be instructed to make sure they greet everyone.

Variation B: For larger groups (e.g., 30 or more), the following option can help make the opening greetings more manageable and less like a mob scene:

A. Have the group form a large circle and have every other person move one step forward.

B. Have the people in the inner circle turn to face the people in the outer circle.

C. Instruct the people in the inner circle to greet each of the people in the outer circle, moving to the left after each greeting.

D. After the people in the inner circle have greeted all the people in the outer circle and returned to their original places, instruct the two circles to move to different places in the room so the inner-circle people and the outer-circle people can greet all the other members of their circles. (For exceptionally large gatherings, these smaller groups can re-form into inner and outer circles, repeating steps A through D until everyone has made personal contact with everyone else.)

Variation C: For very large groups (100 people or more), after sharing the introduction and explaining why “hellos” are important, ask participants to move about the room and greet as many other people as possible in a three- to four-minute time frame. This can work whether in an auditorium setting or in a large room seated theatre style or at tables.

Step Two: The Circle

After making sure that everyone has greeted everyone else, instruct the group to assemble in a circle so every participant can see every other participant’s face. (For very large groups, you may want to

have several circles of 30 to 40 people each.) Allow a few moments of informal silence to give the participants time to refocus their attention on this full-group setting. Ask people to make sure they have greeted everyone. If they have missed someone or are not sure, ask them to go over to that person and say “hello.” Remind them it is better to say “hello” to someone twice than to miss anyone.

Step Three: Checking In

In this component of the activity, each person in the circle addresses the entire group and is given attention by the entire group. People can be asked to give a one-, two-, or three-word description of how they are feeling at that instant, or report one learning from the previous part of the session, or reveal a personal insight, etc. The key is for each person to have the experience of sharing with the group, being noticed by the group and feeling included in the group. It is best to have someone begin and then continue around the circle to that person’s left or right.

In daylong sessions where the group breaks for lunch and/or dinner, it is often advisable to reconvene with a circle and a brief checking in. In addition to continuing to build a sense of community, this practice also helps to refocus participants on the goals of the session and to ensure that every voice is heard.