

MEETING ICE BREAKERS: 26 WAYS TO MAKE THEM MORE FUN AND PRODUCTIVE

Looking for ways to bring new life and energy to your meetings? Turn "dull and dreaded" to "energizing and effective" with these tips.

1. Keep It Moving

Change some aspect of your meeting about every twenty minutes: presentation style, insert Q&A, use a panel discussion, small group breakouts, videos, mini-breaks, team presentations, exercises, games, quizzes, feedback, voting, etc.

2. Social Time

Start ten minutes earlier than usual (e.g., 8:50 instead of 9:00 am). Design the first ten minutes as a social mixer.

3. Bread Winner

Bring different kinds of breakfast breads to morning meetings; rotate "catering" responsibilities to each member of the group with the challenge to bring a new and different kind of bread. Each month the group votes on the best "bread winner" of the month.

4. Ideas To Go

Line the walls of the room with different problems for group members to solve, posed as "How can we..." statements. (e.g., How can we improve service in XYZ area?) Give group members a "stickies" notepad, and invite them to roam the room, write ideas on their pads, and stick them on the problem to which they apply.

5. Act It Out

After information is delivered (training, new policies, etc.), break the meeting into groups of 5 to 8 people and challenge each small group to design a skit, song, rap, dance or other ways to recap part of the "learnings" from the session.

6. Change Places

Have every group member place their business card into a bowl or container. Then, everyone draws a card other than their own. When generating or responding to ideas, participants assume the persona of the person on their card and respond from their (assumed) point of view. This is a great way to "level the playing field" in the meeting.

7. Give It A Chance!

Have soft kids' toys in the room (foam balls, squish toys, etc.)

Any time someone crushes another person's idea (e.g., "that won't work...we tried that before...it'll cost too much..." etc.), group members are invited to pick up the near toy and bombard the offender, shouting "Give It A Chance!"

8. Standup Meeting

Remove all the chairs in the meeting room, and hold the meeting standing up. It will make the meeting shorter.

9. Hourglass

Get a two or three minute egg timer (miniature hourglass) or electronic alarm clock and use it to time discussions. Designate a timekeeper to monitor.

When the agreed-upon time is up, the timekeeper shouts out "Time!" which is the signal to move on. Imposed time constraints often boost creative output.

10. Give Me a Break!

Set a ground rule that any group member can call a break during the meeting for any reason (potty break, food, stretch, etc.)

Set an alarm clock for ten minutes (15 or whatever), and resume the meeting immediately when the alarm sounds. Re-start the meeting with a summary of where you left off.

11. Call Your Office

Pose a challenge to group members.

During a break, group members call their office and talk to anyone they think can give them a new insight on the challenge. Report back to the group.

12. Balloon Toss

Supplies: toy balloons, small note pads and pens or pencils.

Have group members write ideas to a given challenge on a piece of paper (one per sheet), fold the paper and put it inside a balloon. Blow up balloons, and tie them.

When all are done, everyone tosses the balloons for 15-30 seconds, and captures a balloon. Each person takes the new idea they have received, and builds on it. Report to the group.

13. Games

Start each meeting with a game or brain teaser to get the creative juices flowing.

Sources: Games Magazine; The Great Book of Business Games, E. Scannell & J. Newstrom; First Aid for Meetings, C. Hawkins; daily newspaper.

14. Skip It

Instead of having a meeting, make a conscious decision to "skip it." Ask the people who would normally attend to do something to develop their creative awareness ...take a walk, listen to music, draw, go to an art museum, play with a child or play skip-the-rope. Also ask them to capture any ideas which come up while they are playing, and e-mail them to the meeting leader.

15. Celebrate Success

When the group has something to celebrate (open new account, finish project on/ahead of time, promotions, etc.) celebrate it in the meeting with sparkling water served in champagne glasses. If appropriate, use champagne!

16. Cartoon Time

Ask group members to search for and bring a favorite cartoon to the meeting, and post them for all to see. To make it even more challenging, make it any other cartoon except Dilbert™

17. On Your Best Behavior

Designate a portion of each meeting for "meeting skills training." Introduce a new skill at each meeting, such as gate-keeping, building, summarizing, etc. (See First Aid for Meetings or other resources).

After the skill is introduced, have group members practice it in small groups of 5 to 8 people. Each person try to use the skill at least once during a discussion.

18. I Don't Think So!

Ask the group to identify the most common types of disruptive behaviors in meetings (interrupters, boors, manipulators, side conversations, nay-sayers, etc.)

Anytime someone exhibits one of the disruptive behaviors, any group member (or the whole group) can shout out "I Don't Think So!" to lightly remind the "offender."

19. The Funniest Thing

Ask group members to write down the funniest thing that happened to them or in their department since the last meeting. Put the responses in a bowl. Periodically during the meeting, draw them out and invite the group to guess who wrote each story. The "authors" can embellish if time allows.

Variation: skip the writing and just share the stories at the beginning of the meeting or during.

20. Exercise Break

Rotate responsibility for group members to lead the group in some kind of physical exercise to start the meeting or use during breaks. If desired, award prizes for the best exercises of the week/month. Bring a boom box with upbeat music to accompany.

21. Pet pictures

Ask everyone to bring in pictures of their pet(s) or of a friend's pet if they don't have one. Alternative: draw a picture of their pet.

Go around and share stories about the pets. This can be done before or during meetings, or during breaks. Build: ask each person what qualities of their pet they possess.

22. Facilitate This!

Take turns being the meeting facilitator. Responsibility: keep the meeting on track.

Each facilitator is challenged to introduce a new ground rule, game, exercise or brain teaser to make the meeting more fun.

At the end of the meeting, the group votes whether to incorporate the new "tool" regularly or occasionally.

23. Game Breaks

During breaks, stage games or competitions that challenge people mentally or physically. If energy is lagging, use games that involve light physical activity.

24. Outside the Box

During nice weather, hold all or part of the meeting outside. Take advantage of the environment by changing the dress code, refreshments, activities, etc.

There's nothing quite like a poolside location for grinding through a budget meeting, or a meeting under the shade tree for coming up with new ideas.

25. A Little Lower Please

Hire a professional masseuse to give five-minute back and neck rubs to participants during the meeting. Time the massages so that everyone receives the relaxing treat. For example, ten participants x six minutes each = one hour.

In addition to virtually guaranteeing attendance, this can be used to start and end on time. Anyone late misses their massage.

26. Hat

Invite group members to wear a creative hat to the next meeting...or bring a box of fun hats for members to choose. During the meeting, have a "hat parade" while designated judges choose the best (most creative, absurd, etc.) hat.

Challenge members to think (generate ideas, etc.) from the perspective of the person represented by the hat. This can also be directly linked to Edward deBono's "Six Thinking Hats."