



# Meeting Icebreakers



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# Overview

The right icebreaker can profoundly change the tone of a meeting. This is especially true in the early stages of collective impact work, when the norms and culture of a partnership are still developing.

Even when you are starting with a “coalition of the willing,” potential partners come to the table with independent agendas, professional titles, and assumptions about how the work of the partnership can and should unfold. Positive culture is an essential, and often underestimated, enabler of healthy, high-performing teams. A positive culture must be intentionally established and continuously nurtured because it is the [binding agent of any recipe for change](#).

One simple, practical way to build culture is with well-chosen icebreakers at the start of every meeting. Icebreakers can be warm-up questions, mini-exercises, or fun activities.

There are many great icebreakers out there. To get you started, we have curated a few favorites from our colleagues and partners who are working in the field. A more in-depth resource we have also used and recommend is the the book: [Moving Beyond Icebreakers: An Innovative Approach to Group Facilitation, Learning, and Action](#).

# Icebreakers

## Three Questions

“One way to get participants to start thinking about topics in multiple contexts is to use a framework like “head, heart, hands” or “person, role, system” to develop three warm-up questions. An example of the first framework is something like, “What do you think is the biggest obstacle moving the work forward, how do you feel about the group, and what could we do differently to improve our decision-making process?” Another version of this exercise, as [described by The Food Project](#), incorporates drawing into the process.

“Person, role, system” comes from the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s [Results Based Leadership](#) training and is a frame for thinking through strategies to get results.”

– Recommended by Jennifer Perkins, Assistant Director of Collective Impact at Living Cities.

## Spirit Animal

"I once asked a table of new employees what their spirit animal was. I thought everyone would recognize I was only joking around. I was mistaken. The result was that they all took it very seriously, while questioning the life decisions that had brought them to that specific point in their career. We all learned about each other in a way that didn't make anyone feel like they were just bragging by talking about themselves." –

*Recommended by Brittany DeBarros, Collective Impact Associate at Living Cities.*

## Worst Idea

"The technique is simple: Ask the group to create a list of bad, terrible, stupid, illegal or gross ideas. It's a fun way to get people's creative juices flowing and get participation. Nobody gets too worried about saying something stupid when that's the whole point of the exercise. And when you've already said the dumbest thing you're going to say all day, later on you might not be so hesitant to throw out an idea that might actually work. Lastly, while it works as an icebreaker, some of these bad ideas are simply the opposite of good ones—flipping them around is one way to come up with a viable solution you might not have otherwise come up with." – *Recommended by Owen Stone, Senior Associate, Public Sector Innovation at Living Cities.*

## Compare Something Tough to Something Fun

"Decrease the feeling of political or reputational risk associated with speaking honestly about challenges, frustrations, etc. in the work by using a warm up prompt like 'If our [insert: partnership, work, etc.] were an [insert: animal, kitchen appliance, reality show, etc.], what would it be, and why?' Explaining why your team would be The Real Housewives infuses humor and relatability to the statement making it easier to both state and to hear, while still getting the truth on the table." – *Recommended by Tynesia Boyea-Robinson, Director of Collective Impact at Living Cities.*

## Human Knot

"This is an exercise that gets everyone up and out of their seats, communicating and problem solving. [Detailed instructions for the exercise can be found online](#), but the basic idea is that participants stand in a circle facing each other, connect hands with those across from and next to them, and then have to untangle themselves as a group without breaking the chain. Since different group members will inevitably take on different roles in the problem solving that ensues, it can usually be used as a good analogy for discussing the workstyles and roles of group members more broadly." – *Recommended by JaNay Queen, Associate Director, Collective Impact at Living Cities.*

## What's in a Name

“Ask everyone to tell a story about their name. This could include stories about how their parents chose their name, embarrassing mix-ups that have happened, etc. This exercise requires a little time and is best used when some trust has already been established within the group so that the stories are better! A faster, simpler version of this exercise could be a prompt like: first name and an adjective that starts with the letter of your first name ‘Talented Tracey.’ This type of exercise is good for humanizing a group before tough conversations where members may need to be reminded to assume goodwill because everyone in the room is a person that in some way, cares about making sure the right things get done the right way.” – *Recommended by Tracey Turner, Program Associate, Collective Impact at Living Cities.*

## Compliments

“The feeling that participants start and leave a meeting with is one of those intangible results that directly affects group behavior, culture and thus, results. For example, when partners are growing defensive and territorial, this could be a result of individuals not feeling valued and acknowledged in the group. These feelings and resulting behavior can hamstring progress in any group, but especially in one that operates outside of any one organization or formal authority structure as cross-sector partnerships do. An icebreaker where partners share one thing about another member’s work that impressed them since the last meeting, could be one way to establish a tone of acknowledgement and start to eat away at the defensiveness causing progress to stall.” – *Recommended by Brittany DeBarros, Program Associate, Collective Impact at Living Cities.*

***Have questions? Or an icebreaker to share with us?***

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