

Setting the Tone

by Jennifer Stanchfield

Starting With Style

Introductory activities create a positive environment, enhance performance and set the tone for the rest of the program. Taking time for the group to get comfortable and learn each others' names will pay off later.

The more I work with groups, the more I realize the power of the simple things we do as facilitators. An engaging opening activity designed to get the group interacting and sharing names, backgrounds and goals in an intriguing way can really maximize the group process.

Every facilitator has their own set of favourite opening activities. Many activity books have whole sections on this subject. I have learned some of the best and most effective activities in my repertoire from other facilitators, experimenting with groups, and adapting activities over time and experience. The following are a few favourites that work to set the tone for most group situations.

Object Trade

I learned this simple and effective introduction activity as an undergraduate at the University of New Hampshire during a ropes course management class with instructors Pam McPhee and Kim Goody. This activity not only helps participants begin to connect with each other, it also offers an opportunity to find commonalities and define goals for the day. For facilitators, it provides a read on participants' goals and expectations for the day.

Directions:

- Have participants find a partner.
- Ask group members to find something on their persons or something they brought with them to trade (temporarily) with their partners. Encourage participants to share an item with an amusing or

interesting story. Sometimes the simplest objects have involved histories.

- Ask partners to share, 1) something interesting about their object, 2) some information about their own background, and 3) what they would like to get out of the program or day.
- After five minutes or so, have each set of partners introduce each other, sharing information about each other's object, background and goals for the day. Then return the objects to their respective owners.
- If you have a large group, break up these introductions with a few icebreaking games. Have three or four sets of partners introduce each other and share, do a brief icebreaker, and then have three or four more sets of partners share, and so on. The benefit of this method is that while the most comfortable share first, the others warm up.

Postcard Introductions

Collecting interesting postcards is an engaging hobby I enjoy. I was inspired by an activity from Pam McPhee at the University of New Hampshire's Browne Center many years ago when I was a student there. I have managed to gather more than 100 cards over the past few years and often use them as a reflective tool (see *A Teachable Moment* by Cain, Cummings, & Stanchfield, 2005). Postcards can be an engaging way to hook participants right up front. When I use this method to introduce group members to each other, I also learn about group members' goals and expectations for the program. I recommend this method for getting a pulse on your group and gleaning participants' attitudes and expectations for the group experience.

Directions:

- Spread postcards out on a table or floor accessible to all group members.

- Ask group members to choose a card that represents the answer to one or more of the following questions:
 - Why did you come to be a part of the program?
 - What strengths do you bring to the group?
 - What are your expectations for the day?
 - What do you want to achieve as part of the program?
- As in the Object Trade activity, have them find a partner and share their card and information about themselves.
- Give them an opportunity to introduce each other and their chosen cards to the group.
- Due to the novelty of the cards and the opportunity to share information with their partners before answering individually, participants find this activity engaging and less intimidating than other introductory activities.
- Next ask them to find new partners and give each other a low five. These are their low 5 partners.
- Now have them move around the group to find their high 5 partners (give them a high 5), then find their low 5 partners (give them a low 5).
- Next ask them to find new partners and give them an ankle shake. These are their ankle shake partners. Start the sequence again: find their high 5, then low 5, then ankle shake partners.
- Continue this sequence adding new partner activities as appropriate (e.g., a “fishing partner”— one is the reel and one the fish). You will witness laughter, positive interaction, and fun. Participants really will remember each other.
- Later, you can use the partners to form groups or have them run through this sequence to say goodbye to their partners as a closing at the end of the day.

High 5 Mingle

I learned this fun introduction game from Aimee Desrosier Cochran, a former intern at High 5 Adventure Learning Center, who used this activity during her time at Springfield College’s Challenge Course program. I use it with all ages and backgrounds to give group members an opportunity to warm up and interact in a non-threatening way. The beauty of this activity is that it is energizing and fun and everyone gets a chance to come face-to-face with someone new and do a brief introduction. I recommend this activity for groups where you want to break up cliques and facilitate group interaction with everyone. This can be especially helpful in classroom settings.

Directions:

- Have everyone find a partner.
- Ask the group members to give their partner a “high 5.” Tell participants these are now their high 5 partners.

Keep this activity interesting for participants and yourself by exploring and experimenting with new twists.

Concentric Circles

This excellent introductory activity can also be used as a great reflective and closing activity. It is a personal favourite and has been a staple activity in my repertoire since I first picked it up from Paul Hutchinson during our time as fellow graduate students leading programs at MSU Mankato. It works well as an opening warm up, because it is fairly non-intimidating with each person asked to converse with only one other person at a time. This activity can be adapted to most groups regardless of the age of the participants or the size of the group. It works especially well with large groups.

Directions:

- Divide the group in half, and have them form two circles with the participants facing each other in an inner circle and an outer circle.
- Ask participants to greet each other by name and have them participate in a cooperative activity together such as

“finger fencing,” “gotcha,” or “one-handed shoe tying” (see Jim Grout and Karl Rohnke’s *Back Pocket Adventure* for creative partner activities).

- After completing the activity, ask participants to share their answers to a “get to know you” question asked by the facilitator (e.g., What is the most unusual food you have ever eaten? What was your favourite vacation? What do you want to get out of today’s program?).
- After a few moments of conversation, invite the inner circle to form new partnerships by moving four spaces to the left, greeting other participants they pass. Ask the new partners to greet each other then provide another cooperative activity and a question to discuss.
- The activity continues with alternating movement between the inside and outside circle, followed by activities and questions.

Goals, Expectations and Boundaries

The Object Trade and Postcard Introduction activities can be used quite effectively for goal setting. Using these activities to articulate goals helps the facilitator and group members tailor activities to meet the needs of the group and appropriately order and choose activities and interventions.

Another successful engaging activity I have used to help group members articulate their goals, expectations and/or attitudes uses campaign buttons.

Button for the Day

This fun activity was inspired by a shopping trip a co-worker and I took to a local novelty store. Jen Ottinger, High 5’s business manager, and I were gathering postcards and charms for my processing tool kit. Jen spotted a campaign button display that included an assortment of buttons depicting a variety of words, clever slogans and symbols ranging from yin yang and peace signs to lightning bolts and phrases such as “trust me” or “cleverly disguised as a

responsible adult.” Jen said “I bet you could do something with those buttons.” At that moment one of my favourite introduction and reflection activities was created.

The next day we used the buttons at our staff retreat. As colleagues came into the room, I asked them to pick a button that represented their expectations for the day. It was a great success as an icebreaker and for goal setting; later we used the buttons as a reflection tool referring back to those we had initially chosen as we recognized our progress throughout our meeting.

Directions:

- Place an assortment of buttons with a variety of appropriate slogans and symbols in a space where all group members have access to them (to find meaningful and interesting buttons, visit gift shops, stationers and other novelty shops). Have a large enough selection for group members to feel they have a choice.
- Ask participants to choose a button that represents their mood, or the attitude, quality, or strength they are bringing to the day or program.
- Depending on the size or goals of the group, have participants choose partners and share as in the Object Trade activity, or go around in a circle and ask group members to share individually (always allow group members to pass).
- Participants seem to enjoy wearing the buttons for the day; they can be interesting conversation pieces and add a sense of fun and camaraderie.
- At the end of the day or program, use them in closing to report on any changes in attitudes, strengths and so on.

Along with giving participants an opportunity to share some of their goals for a program, it is important for the facilitator to set any necessary expectations or ground rules for the group. Front-loading expectations and ideas for the group to think about at the start of the program is important and can be effectively done in a fun, short, interactive way. There

should be a difference between the program/facilitator-driven ground rules communicated at the start of a program and the group norms or value agreements created by group members themselves later in the group process. It is after the group has experienced some time working together — seeing and experiencing the strengths and weaknesses and actually experiencing some conflict or struggle — that creating their own norms will become most valuable.

Giving Learners Control and Responsibility for Learning

Empowering participants to feel like they own their learning experience and have control from the start of their group experience can encourage participation and “buy in” from group members. Simple but intentional actions can establish a positive trusting tone in which participants feel empowered rather than “at the mercy” of the facilitator.

Think about creating opportunities that build this sense of choice and control for participants from the very beginning of the program. In warm-up activities where someone is in the spotlight make sure there is a rule that allows a person who may be uncomfortable about being in this position an easy “out” or an option to participate at their own pace.

For example, the icebreaker “Have You Ever” (Rohnke, 1991) requires a participant to stand in the centre and ask a question about something they have done in order to establish commonalities with their fellow group members, like “Have you ever been to Paris?” At that point, everyone in the circle who has been to Paris must leave their spot and find a new one, and the person from the centre grabs one of those empty spots leaving someone new in the centre to ask a question. At the beginning of the game I establish an easy buzz word the person in the centre can say if they can’t think of a “Have You Ever” question.

Creating situations that allow more introverted group members some kind of

“out” or “aid” gives them an opportunity to participate fully and warm up to the group process, trusting that you won’t put them in a situation that is embarrassing or put them “on the spot” before they are ready. This technique used during a silly warm-up game can pay off later in the group process. By building trust in this way, group members build comfort within the group and are more willing to push their comfort zone later in the group process when it really matters. If some people are challenged too early in a program before any trust builders or warm ups, a facilitator risks losing them!

Some strategies that I have found to help participants feel what John Dewey called “perceived internal freedom” and in control of their learning include the following:

- Allowing participants to pass in a group discussion especially at the start of the group process.
- Thoughtfully sequencing activities and discussion methods to build comfort within the group incrementally.
- Taking time to get the group warmed up! Start with partner sharing before large group sharing.
- Not calling on people to share in a group, but instead creating opportunities for participants to volunteer.

References

- Cain, J., Cummings, M. & Stanchfield, J. (2005). *A teachable moment*. Dubuque, IA: Kendall Hunt.
- Rhonke, K. (1991). *The bottomless baggie*. Dubuque, IA: Kendall Hunt.
- Rohnke, K. & Grout, G. (1998). *Backpocket adventure*. Needham Heights, MA: Simon & Schuster.

Jenn Stanchfield is the program design and curriculum specialist at High Five Adventure Learning Center in Brattleboro Vermont. This selection is from her upcoming book, Tips & Tools: For the Art of Group Facilitation, Wood 'N' Barnes Publishing, 405-946-0621.