

ADULT LEARNING ICEBREAKER EXERCISE

TOM GALVIN

This is an icebreaker exercise that I have used for adult learning environments to build a collaborative, adult learning-style environment. I have also used variations of it in other settings, largely condensed for time. I felt that it was better to do something experiential whereby the group would discover and demonstrate their norms rather than merely discuss what the norms should be and hope they would be followed. I offer this for your consideration. Feel free to use or change as desired. I welcome your feedback.

This exercise works well for groups of 12-24, which is the range that I've conducted this with. It should normally be completed in two hours, including a 10-minute break. The first part normally takes 60-70 minutes, the second part about 45.

The facility should be set up where participants can easily be divided into teams of four. Whiteboards or butcher pads are recommended so that all participants can see the results of group work.

The lead facilitator requires a stopwatch and timer (smartphone works fine).

The lead facilitator should welcome the participants and introduce the desired outcomes (whether the official ones of the lesson or something like the following):

- Demonstrate the importance of reflection
- Build a collaborative and inclusive environment
- Foster the establishment of group norms

The lead facilitator should **not** say anything about the structure of the exercise in advance, except to say that it is multi-phased. It is even helpful if the facilitator can make it seem like Phase III is the conclusion and then spring Phase IV as a surprise (this is my usual tactic).

The lead facilitator should also determine how to choose the "group lead" for Part One, Phase III (such as designated in advance, ask for volunteers, or have the group nominate one).

Key point: In Part One, Phases I-III, it is critical that you refer to anything about team or group solutions as being achieved through **consensus**. DO NOT use the word **agreement** or **negotiation**. This is critical for Part One, Phase IV.

PART ONE: EXERCISE

PHASE I. INDIVIDUAL LEVEL

Lead facilitator announces Phase I and sets a timer for three minutes. Remind the participants that they have been in busy environments without much time to think, so they will be granted something they are not used to having – three minutes of silence.

During the three minutes, they are allowed take notes, reflect, browse the Internet, but not to interact with any other participant.

Their requirement is to consider their personal definition of *leadership*.

- Depending on the audience, other terms can be used instead such as *fairness, justice, or readiness*. The term should be well-understood and a generally desired or popular term but abstract enough so that there is a natural degree of dissensus over its meaning.

Facilitator should then give a clear indicator that time has started. I used “time starts now,” and then start the timer. Facilitator can use an audio signal or simply conclude the three minutes with “Time!”

Phase II starts immediately.

PHASE II. SMALL TEAM LEVEL

Facilitator divides the group into Teams of four and assigns them a whiteboard or physical location to do their work. The teams should be positioned before instructions are given.

Once everyone is in place, set the timer for 15 minutes and give the following instructions:

- Teams are to develop a consensus definition of *leadership*.
- Teams are only allowed 12 words and all words count. (Do not include “Leadership is,” just provide the definition).
- No jargon, acronyms, or foreign words. “Words in the Scrabble Dictionary” is a term I’ve used before, but otherwise the definitions must be prepared using ordinary English words.
- Also must use proper English grammar (i.e., no cheating by skipping or deleting words).

In practice, 15 minutes can seem excessive – I’ve had groups finish in less than five. Do not hurry the exercise, only if all teams have concluded does the facilitator stop time before 15 minutes.

At the conclusion, ask each Team to read their definitions. If they cannot be displayed due to lack of whiteboard space, etc., then the lead facilitator should write it down on the central whiteboard so they are visible during Phase III. However, adequate space must be reserved for Phase III.

Phase III starts immediately.

PHASE III. FULL GROUP

Lead facilitator now reconvenes, announces Phase III, and selects a group lead from among the participants. Any of the following options for making the selection are OK, however the group lead should not be someone already in a leadership position in real life among the participants – the group lead should be an ordinary rank-and-file member of the organization.

- Pre-designate the group lead in advance (should ensure the facilitator is expecting this)
- Request a volunteer (caution: a poor group lead can derail Phase III)
- Ask the group to nominate someone – if the group has a leader already, ask the leader to select their group lead (this is my default approach)

Once the facilitator is designated, explain that the goal is now to produce a single group consensus definition of *leadership*. The new rules are:

- 15 words – otherwise same rules apply regarding acceptable words and how counted.
- No time limit. The group is allowed to take as much time as needed. (This is actually not quite true – see below).
- Group lead determines when the task is complete, but consensus is expected.

Facilitator moves to the back of the room, signals for the group lead to begin, and starts the stopwatch. The facilitator stays silent and gives no signs or approval or disagreement.

In reality, the event is timed based on overall time available to the exercise. The general approach is to stop at 30 minutes. The facilitator should give a signal to the group lead at about 28 minutes to wrap up. If consensus looks impossible by then, ask the group lead to make the decision and move on – and that disagreements will be accounted for (without saying how).

Facilitator announces the final time to complete the task, and congratulates the group for their efforts.

Phase IV starts immediately.

PHASE IV. CAPTURING DISAGREEMENTS

Facilitator should then tell the group that there is indeed a Phase IV and offer something like the following as a prelude:

- Let's say that [the group consensus answer] is now going to be briefed to the leadership, and all of you [the members of this working group] are going to brief your respective bosses.
- You know that consensus is not agreement, and there may be something in this definition that is going to make you feel a little comfortable going back to your boss.

Instruct the participants to:

- Write down the word or phrase (or words or phrases) that they are most uncomfortable with and do not share it yet.
- If there is none, that's ok. It means the participant is happy with the definition as is.

- If there are multiple such words and phrases, that's ok too.
- Tell the students that they must give the word or phrase marked down – they may not change their mind based on what others said

Then, using a different colored marker (I usually use red), annotate the Phase III group answer with the participants' Phase IV responses.

- Call on each individual and ask them to say out loud whatever word or phrase they wrote down
- Underline the word or phrase if identified the first time and nearby put a tally mark (/).
- If a word or phrase is repeated, only add more tally marks (e.g., ~~////~~ //).

Once this is complete, summarize the markings and give the participants a 10-minute break

PART TWO: REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

The recommended approach is to go phase by phase and recount the lessons of each. Highlight to the maximum extent those practices which were useful or constructive that would be good candidates for group norms. Maintain dialogue and do not allow personal attacks or arguments over anything that the team or group struggled with.

Phase I.

- Ask participants to recount how they spent their three minutes; and perhaps how they might have used them differently.
- Reinforce the idea that reflection does not require a lot of time – but requires space to concentrate and think purposefully.

Phase II.

- I generally don't go team to team, but just open the floor for input about what was effective about their team work and what was not.
- Did they start with the end in mind? (For example, draw 12 blanks on the board and negotiate over how to fill them in) Or did they start with an open slate (Brainstorm first, then draw consensus) Which was better?
- Did everyone feel as though they were heard or had fair opportunities to contribute? If not, what could have been done better?
- Did each team have a leader? Or was it more democratic? Did the choice of leadership foster or inhibit the team's work?
- Was 15 minutes enough time? Did it feel like you rushed yourself or like you had an eternity? Could you have managed time differently?
- What might be some good norms based on this discussion?

Phase III.

- I normally start with group lead and give that person the first word to describe how it went.
- What were the important differences between small group and large group work?
- Was it harder to get one's chance to speak? Did you feel unable to contribute? How did you respond or react?
- What mechanisms did you use to ensure smooth flow of the conversation? Did it break down over time? Does that mean you should or should not use that approach in future?
- At what point did you feel that we should stop generating new ideas and get to the solution? Or, at what point did you feel like the group was rushing to a conclusion and needed to do more analysis?
- Did anyone give up? At what point and why?
- What might be some good norms based on this discussion?

Phase IV.

- Was your chosen problem word or phrase discussed during the team or group work? Is your discomfort rooted in dissatisfaction in how it was addressed, or simply a continued belief that the word is a problem?
- Could you live with the final result or would you feel compelled to argue against it?
- What might be some good norms based on this discussion? (Continue with getting the group to codify its norms)