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Best ice-breakers for remote meetings

Here's a summary of lessons learned, compiled from responses from some of the brightest minds in the facilitation world, followed by some straightforward tips you may want to use in an appropriate situation.

Lessons learned:

- Define the meaning and purpose of "ice-breaker," and make sure that such an activity is appropriate. If your objective is to create an atmosphere that's conducive to trust and willing collaboration among those who work remotely, activities designed to foster this sense of belongingness are crucial, especially in the early stages of team formation. If, however, your objective is to keep people awake, focused or otherwise present, you might be able to accomplish this other ways

- If your ice-breaker serves as an introductory activity that helps a group move quickly to task, then you'll want to select activities that do just that, rather than choosing a "fun" exercise that has little bearing on the work at hand

- Make the distinction between an introductory activity that's needed for a team with vested interest in working well together over time, versus for members of a team that may meet only occasionally. The former warrant considerably more attention than the latter.

- Consider the company's culture, meeting purpose, relationship among team members and business goals as you ponder the need for an introductory activity. The same activity that works well in one environment may fall flat in another

- Acknowledge that some people are more task-oriented, while others are intent on first making sure that a healthy team process is in place—and plan activities accordingly

- If you've successfully achieved meeting objectives, don't always assume that trust of fellow members will follow naturally. Inordinate focus on completing tasks may come at the expense of trust, especially if some team members felt rushed or pressured to refrain from speaking "off topic"

- For some, the actual meeting *is* the ice breaker, and the conversations that follow (in whatever form they take) is where the big leaps are made in building relationships that move the group closer to its goals

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Planning to get (and keep) a remote team going:

Before the meeting

- Ask people to introduce themselves in advance of the meeting/session by setting up a special section on a shared website, or using a web meeting tool
    - Invite participants to post a photo of themselves, state a few comments about their background, expectations for the team/meeting/course, and other pertinent information. Depending on the culture and comfort level of participants, you may want to ask them to include some personal information as a means of building relationships, such as hobbies or favorite sports
- Another variation on the photo theme: Try asking people to send their photos to a central place that others (except the facilitator/leader) can't see at first. During the first call, you can ask people to try to match the voice to the photo
- You can also display the photo of the person talking/presenting if your meeting software allows for this

During the meeting

- Greet each person as s/he hops on the call. Ask people a "social" question of each person as s/he joins. (Examples: "It's 10 below in Boston this morning. How's Tokyo?" or "Steve, where are you headed for vacation next week?") However, don't delay the start time just to prolong this social check-in. Once everyone has joined, or once you've decided to begin, you should be ready to jump right in with your agenda

- Right before you officially begin the meeting, you may want to announce who's on the call, time permitting. If you're using a web meeting tool that allows everyone to see who's online, you can avoid the verbal roll call

- If you choose to start with a traditional ice-breaker type of question for a remote team, try one of these. Some are more appropriate for teams whose members know each other, and some work better for a new team:
    - What's one thing you need to share with us to help you be fully present at this meeting?
    - Give us one word to summarize where you are right now

- What achievement are you proudest of so far this week?
- Reveal something about yourself that others would be shocked to learn
- What really made you laugh recently?
- What would you most rather be doing right now?
- What's your favorite food of the season?
- Where would you most like to go on vacation if money were no object?
- What skills can you contribute to the team that may not be obvious to the rest of us?

- At the start of each meeting, ask participants to draw a clock. As each one joins the call, assign a number as s/he joins, starting at 1:00. If you expect more than 12 participants, use half-hour increments. When you want to poll the group quickly, start anywhere on the clock and go in either direction. This is also helpful to remember who you have not yet heard from
- Spend time up front agreeing on operating guidelines for this meeting and for ongoing meetings. By creating operating principles as a group, participants will have a chance to learn more about each other's values and beliefs
- Asses the "temperature" of the team intermittently. For example, ask: "On a scale of 1-10, let's go around the virtual room and ask how close we are to achieving our objectives for this call." Or if you're using a web meeting tool, post a quick survey that can be anonymous to assess where people are. For example, using a scale of 1-10, ask about the relative energy level of each participant
- Encourage brevity when polling members by asking them to crystallize thoughts or feelings. Asking for the "top one or two things" or "fill in the blank" tend to work well to elicit top-of-mind responses
- If some have a limited command of the predominant language, let everyone know that you will paraphrase frequently to ensure shared understanding. Invite everyone to ask others to slow down or provide an explanation, or to admit confusion

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Outside of formal (synchronous) meeting time

- Invite people to informally check in 10-15 minutes prior to the start of a working session. Or ask them to stay on for a few minutes afterward if they can. Some may relish the opportunity to chat, while others may be anxious to bypass that chat time for "real work"
- Have an optional 15-minute call each week dedicated to personal check-ins. Try to avoid Mondays and Fridays. Encourage those who don't participate on the team calls to join these check-in calls periodically
- Use asynchronous team space for communication. This might take the form of a dedicated team portal, or a web meeting room where people can drop in and see what others are saying or asking. You want to pose some provocative questions to encourage people to drop in and "chat" more often
- Have everyone leave a brief voicemail to other team members on each Monday or Friday, letting others know what's up with them personally or professionally—especially if such knowledge is likely to affect the work of the team.