



HEY, BABY,

Do You Wanna Dance?

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The first ten minutes provide precious learning time — the core insights about our participants' attitudes and behaviors are likely to be revealed then, before we get into the heart of the topic we're to research!

A few years ago, I was called in to run a new-product idea meeting for a confectionary company. The assembled participants included a rather mild-mannered research manager from the Midwest and a highly extroverted marketing manager who hailed from Great Britain. During the pre-session planning phase, I learned that there was no great affection between these two.

I began the session with a simple Ice Breaker exercise, asking participants to give us a one-minute introduction, including name and role in the company, as well as something they were passionate about away from work, that their colleagues may not know about them. The soft-spoken researcher lit up as he mentioned his humongous rock-and-roll record collection and his vintage guitars. The Englishman mentioned his punk-rocker youth. The two guys literally moved closer on the couch... and proceeded to work together with eagerness, mutual respect and collaboration. It was a first-time experience for them.

As market researchers and consultants, we know that the very first few minutes are critical in setting the tone and expectations for a discussion group. Some even say that we make our assessments about whether we are drawn to people or not in the first three seconds! Hence “snap judgments.” That’s all the more reason why I chafe when clients suggest we cut the Ice Breakers out of the guide (and cram in more questions). Perhaps even worse is when the back-room listeners decide that those first few minutes are so unimportant that they can send emails, make telephone calls or even leave the room for the beginning of the session.

I find just the opposite: the first ten minutes provide precious learning time. The core insights about our participants' attitudes and behaviors are likely to be revealed then, before we get into the heart of the topic

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we are to research! The insights are there for the picking, if only we give participants interesting opportunities to tell us who they are and if we pay close attention to what they offer us.

Ice Breakers (or Warm-Ups, if you prefer) should be relatively fast, fun and engaging. They should help participants get comfortable with themselves and each other (talking aloud in a group is not so easy for everyone). Ice Breakers can be related to or set the tone for the task or the topic being researched, or they can be seemingly unrelated to the topic. For the researcher and back-room listeners, these Ice Breakers help elicit stories (“facts wrapped in emotion”) to recall and connect with later. These activities begin to coalesce a group of individuals into a “team.”

Actually, activities like these can be incorporated at any time in a discussion when you are looking to boost or change the energy, add some humor or levity (when a team gets dry) or incorporate a physical, emotional and mental stretch. (Some semantics here: I use the term *Ice Breakers* for exercises used in the first part of a discussion and *Team Builders* for use later in session.)

Sample Ice Breakers, from Easy to More Difficult/Riskier

These are some ideas to get you started inventing your own:

- “Tell us about a favorite [pick one] author, book, movie, song or hero/heroine.”
- “Tell us about a story or myth from childhood that has stayed with you.”
- “If you weren’t in your current profession/job and didn’t have to worry about finances, what would you do?”
- “Describe a favorite food, meal or restaurant experience.”
- “Give us one word or phrase that conveys your emotions right now.”
- “Tell us about a place you would like to visit.”
- “What is something you were really good at as a kid?”
- “You have been invited to be a guest on ‘The Tonight Show with Jay Leno.’ What is your special talent?”
- “If you could change places with someone, who would that be?”
- “If you could go back in time, who (or when) would you choose?”
- Each person picks out a puzzle piece

and has to find the mates in order to put the puzzle together.

- Each person chooses some random 3-D materials (like foam, pipe cleaners or ribbon) and has to huddle with others to quickly make a collage.
- Theater Games: these require some training and experience before you should lead a team through them. Two that can be done easily and quickly, even in a focus group room: pass around an imaginary ball, or have partners mirror each other's moves for 60 seconds.

Five Tips for Using Ice Breakers

1. Model your response first.

As moderator/facilitator, you have to put something into the pot if you want to get something out. I recommend that you model the kind of response to an exercise that you hope to get from your participants. Be brief (if you have asked them for a “one-minute intro,” yours should be less than a minute). And be authentic; don't make up an example if it's not true for you. While you are modeling, it gives them a minute to think of something, and it helps clarify the task (if they aren't sure about what you are after).

2. Go from “safe” (or simple) to more revelatory.

You might be able to develop enough comfort and trust in a group to have them reveal the “food they eat in secret,” but that should not be the first exercise you use to get them to feel comfortable. Start simple and safe, and you can increase the complexity and intimacy as you go. Begin with verbal exercises, and later you can ask for drawings, symbols, even collages. As you and your team work together, you might even go deeper into “meditative” exercises or theater games. These can be more challenging and take more time, but depending on the topic, they can be well worth the effort.

3. Accept whatever they offer you, and thank them for it.

They may have come up with responses that you hadn't imagined. Or they may be stuck and can't think of a response. Accept a “pass” and come back to them later.

4. If an exercise doesn't work...

Change your explanation, give an example or move onto a different exercise. I asked a group to tell me about “a collection” they had, and my first participant looked at me blankly and said he'd never had a collection. When I offered examples like “coupons” or “shoes,” however, he

immediately recalled his baseball-card collection, and his face expressed the glee and wonder of being transported back to his youth.

5. Use related/unrelated or “seemingly” unrelated exercises.

In my first story in this article, the passion away from work was totally unrelated to our task. Another time, when warming up a group to a discussion about branding, I asked participants to tell me a story about their name, and it was amazing what juicy stories they shared! That raw material played in very nicely as we began to talk about the client's brand name and what it did or did not convey.

But, Most Important... Is the Attitude!

“Hey, baby, do you wanna dance?” is an invitation to engage, to play with another. It is a statement that you offer with confidence in yourself and an expectation that others will respond positively.

As researchers, we try to unlock what is going on inside the minds, and perhaps hearts, of our subjects. If we approach that process with the “wrong” attitude, our probing and questioning can be an arduous task; our panelists can feel used, wrung dry. I believe that when you start with a delightful Ice Breaker (and sprinkle another one or two in throughout your discussion, to keep the energy flowing), you set the stage for a dynamic that will *attract communication*. You make it a more pleasurable and productive experience for yourself, your participants and your back room. 📧

