

Activities & Icebreakers

10 Things I Believe to be True

Overview: This activity is useful as an icebreaker for a group that doesn't know each other well or as an activity to get the group ready for an intense discussion on culture or organizational change or strategy. It is particularly useful in introducing concepts such as the complexity of culture or ethnographic interviewing.

Supplies: Paper and pen, for each participant. Flip charts or a dry erase board and markers, for the facilitator.

Participant setup: This activity requires very little introduction to the activity, on purpose.

Instructions:

- Ask participants to write a list of **ten** things they believe to be true. Give them about 10-15 minutes, at the most.
 - The activity works better if participants do this as they enter the room, or as pre-work before the session (if you can get them to do it).
 - Leave the interpretation of the term *belief* up to participants. If they insist, tell them it can be as simple or as serious as they like. Be prepared for participants' lists to include statements about anything and everything - the supernatural: I believe that God exists, I believe in karma; to the political: I believe our president is a criminal; to the mundane: I believe the grass is green. As a facilitator, try not to react (even though others in the room will) and definitely do not scorn anyone's beliefs.
 - It is a good idea to create a worksheet that has 10 blanks to fill out so that participants are discouraged from writing long paragraphs for each belief.
- Ask participants to find a partner who they do not know well. Each participant should interview his or her partner, learning the partner's name and **three** things she or he believes to be true. Tell participants that they should not simply trade lists to read, but should share their three beliefs in conversation. This step can usually be completed in 5–10 minutes.
- Ask participants to introduce their partners to the entire group and to share **one** thing their partner believes to be true. As the facilitator, three columns on flip chart paper or a dry erase board. Capture short versions of these beliefs in the first column.
- After everyone has shared, ask participants why they chose their particular three beliefs to share with their partner as they were being interviewed. Write these responses in the second column on the board.
- Then, ask participants why, when they were introducing their partner to the group, they chose that one belief to share. Write these responses on the board in the third column.

Debrief: Depending on the purpose of the session, this activity provides a segue into future conversations about concepts of culture, ethical representation, or ethnographic research. As a tool illustrating culture and culture change, ask them to reflect on their understandings of the term *belief* and use their lists to demonstrate the difficulty of changing the beliefs and values of an organization. You might discuss the problems of defining culture in terms of easily articulated, or seen, beliefs and then emphasize the normalized, invisible aspects of cultural life that we would never think to write on a list or to state to a stranger.

Theme Song or Music Match

Overview: This activity is useful as an icebreaker for a group that knows each other well or as an activity to help you get to know them, as a facilitator. It is excellent for building relationships within a group that is struggling with internal conflict.

Supplies: Paper and pen, for each participant. A laptop with speakers or a sound system for playing music. Spotify, YouTube, iTunes, or other music platform.

Participant setup: Share the instructions below and explain that this is a fun activity to help breakup a long work session, or meeting.

Instructions:

- Before the session or event, ask participants to submit their favorite or “theme” song, to you only. This only works if their submissions are anonymous!
 - Songs are first-come-first-serve. If more than one person submits the same song, ask the last participants to submit a different song.
 - Suggest they send you the artist, too, to be sure you are able to locate the correct song.
- Play the songs throughout the session and ask participants to write down who they think matches each song.
- At the end, play excerpts of each song and have each person stand when their song is played to reveal the answers.
- As a bonus for teams, create a playlist or CD of all the songs to be given out to the team as their team “soundtrack.”

Debrief: Discussion around this activity could include topics such as cultural diversity and inclusion in the workplace or preconceived ideas of what type of music people enjoy. Music is full of cultural implications, so there is a lot that could be drawn from this activity simply on the topic of culture and change (or trends).

Create your own Logo/Patch

Overview: Use this activity as an icebreaker in groups that do not know each other well or as an activity to illustrate culture concepts.

Supplies: Construction paper, markers, stickers, and other various art supplies that could be used to create a patch or logo.

Participant setup: Depending on how you are using this activity, you can share as much or as little background information is necessary for the purpose. This can be done as an individual activity (i.e. icebreaker, get-to-know-you) or as a group of 3-4 people. In a large group, consider breaking up groups by department or use this as a compare/contrast exercise.

Optional background for doing a “patch design” with groups, tell them: For every space flight, the astronaut crew designs their own mission patch. Included in the patch design are various elements describing the different aspects of their particular mission. The patch often uses symbols to represent events or values meaningful to the crew. The names of the crew are usually incorporated into the design, as is the name of the space vehicle and its mission number.

Instructions:

- Ask participants to design a “mission patch” or logo that describes them as a team.
 - If doing this as an individual activity, the instructions are the same – they are just designing something that represents their interests, beliefs, values, etc.
- Have each group share and explain their design.

Debrief: This activity is useful for illustrating embedded values and beliefs in an organizational culture, for pointing out the seen and unseen aspects of culture. If using this with several small groups, you can compare and contrast the designs. Ask the participants, what is missing? Why were things included and others left out? Ask them about the seen and unseen aspects of their culture that is preventing desired change – are these aspects included in any of their designs, why/why not?

Alien Invasion

Overview: Use this activity in teams to illustrate change.

Supplies: An open floorplan. Scotch tape, for marking off the floor. A hardboiled egg. Various art and office supplies that could be used to wrap the egg such as cardboard, drinking straws, scotch tape, and scissors. A basket or trashcan.

Participant setup: Everybody has been captured by aliens and they will only be released if they help the alien to drop their egg on Mars without breaking it. The alien has made some of their group members speechless, while the others are either totally paralyzed or deaf (just in case they try to escape or call for help).

Instructions:

- Ask for 2-3 volunteers to be blindfolded and then ask them to step outside the room, while you give instructions to the remaining participants.
- Divide the remaining participants into 2 groups (try to separate the noisiest, most talkative from the quietest).
 - The first group (the noisiest) are not allowed to talk throughout the game. They are also not allowed to physically help with the egg. They can, however, give their ideas on how to protect the egg but only through body language and without touching.
 - The second group (the quietest) are not allowed to move, they are only allowed to talk.
 - Physically separate the noisiest and the quietest so they are out of arms reach.
 - Explain to them that those outside will be blindfolded but they are allowed to talk and move.
- Set up the room so that there is an area taped off on the floor, with the egg in one area of the space and the basket or trashcan at the far end. Safely scatter various office supplies or objects throughout the space as obstacles.
- Ask the volunteers outside to put on their blindfolds and come in the room. Explain that they must get the egg to “Mars”, or inside the basket without breaking it. If they step outside the “safe zone” (i.e. the taped off area) they must begin again. To make it more complicated, you can add a rule that states the 2-3 volunteers must transport the egg together – in other words, they must all 3 be touching the egg as it is moved around the safe zone.
- Give them a deadline of 15 minutes (or shorter) to add urgency.
- To add extra difficulty, throughout the activity move the objects or the basket and/or take away the ability of some that are talking too much.

Debrief: Ask them what was difficult, easy about the activity. How did they respond to changes throughout the process? Were some folks uncomfortable not being able to talk? This activity is useful in illustrating the impact of leadership on change – what happens when the end goal (e.g. Mars) changes, yet the communication of the change doesn’t trickle down? Ask them if they were nervous about breaking the egg – how would their behavior have differed if they knew it was hardboiled, or unbreakable (i.e. discuss risk in terms of culture and change).

Sneak a Peak

Overview: This is a problem-solving activity that can be used to illustrate communication challenges in an organizational culture, and in cultural change. Use this activity in a group large enough to divide into smaller groups of at least 4 per group.

Supplies: Legos or office supplies to build identical sculptures or objects for each group. A timer.

Participant setup: Explain that the aim of this challenge is for each group to try and build an exact copy of a pre-built sculpture or artifact that is hidden from the view of the group. Emphasize “exact.” The catch is only one person in each group can look at the model at a time and for only ten seconds. They then return back to their team and describe what they see. They are not allowed to bring anything with them (e.g. phones, cameras, paper, etc.) when they come up to view the item.

Instructions:

- Before the challenge begins you will need to build a small sculpture or object with some of the building blocks and hide it from the group behind a wall, or sheet. To add complexity, place “Write your team name here” on paper somewhere within your artifact.
- Divide participants into small groups of 4-6 and give each group a set of supplies and include items that are not needed to build the sculpture (but don’t tell them that).
- Place the sculpture in an area that is an equal distance from all the groups.
- Give the teams 3-5 minutes to come up with a team name and structure of “leaders” (i.e. a rank order of which team member will go 1st, 2nd, etc. to view the object).
- When ready, ask the first team leader from each group to come up at the same time to look at the sculpture for ten seconds and try to memorize it before returning to their team.
- After they return to their teams, give them 1 minute or less to instruct their teams about how to build an exact replica of your sculpture.
- After one minute of trying to recreate the sculpture, instruct the next round of team leaders to come up for a “sneak a peek” before returning to their team and trying to recreate the sculpture. To add difficulty, have the 1st team leaders switch teams.
- The challenge should be continued in this pattern until one of the team’s successfully duplicates the original sculpture.

Debrief: Ask them what was difficult, easy about the activity. Did they have a strategy for their ranking of leaders? Was there a useful strategy in memorizing the object and/or communicating it back? How did the team react when the leaders switched teams? Did any group think they had it, when they did not create the object exactly? This activity can lead to discussions on change, communication styles, and the impact of culture change influenced by changing leadership within an organization.

Collaborative Drawing

Overview: This activity is a fun way to illustrate preconceived opinions, ideas, beliefs within an organization and to demonstrate how individuals contribute to change within an organization.

Supplies: Paper and drawing utensils for all participants. A timer.

Participant setup: Instruct participants to combine their artistic talents together to create the ultimate drawing without seeing what others have added before them.

Instructions:

- Distribute paper and writing utensils to each participant. Make sure they are sitting in some sort of orderly fashion such as a circle or in straight lines.
- Instruct participants to fold their paper into four equal sections, as you would fold a letter. They should then unfold the paper so that it is flat again.
- Tell them to draw a head for their drawing in the uppermost section. It doesn't matter what kind of head they draw or where on the upper section it is, as long as the neck connects to the top of the second section on the paper.
- Instruct participants to fold their paper over in order to hide the head they drew, leaving only the very bottom of the neck showing to help the next player in their drawing.
- Tell participants to pass their folded papers to their left and accept the paper being handed from their right side. Each time a new paper is given to each player, they must draw the missing section, connecting it to the other person's previous section without actually looking to see what it looks like. This process will be repeated for all three of the other remaining sections: torso, legs, and feet. Make sure that all the participants know to leave the very bottom of their drawing visible so that the next person can continue on. Each section should be timed to avoid spending too long on this game.
- Once the drawings are all completed, pass them back to the person who drew the head and ask them to open up the papers and check out the crazy creatures or people that were drawn.

Debrief: Use this activity to discuss communicating organizational change. Ask how many people were surprised by the end result of what they set out to draw initially. Ask how many people were sure or unsure about what was being drawn when they were handed a new piece of paper. Discuss the risks of assuming all individuals know the values and beliefs of an organization – of knowing the goals and mission/vision of an organization.

Diversity or Privilege Walk

Overview: This activity is designed to provide an opportunity to understand the intricacies of diversity and privilege, and to challenge our definitions of diversity and privilege based on being members of social identity groups in Western culture. Please note that this exercise is not meant to make anyone feel guilty or ashamed of her or his privilege or lack of privilege related to any social identity categories. Rather, the exercise seeks to highlight the fact that everyone has SOME diversity/privilege, even as some people have more privilege than others.

*NOTE: This is a very “high risk” activity that requires trust building and safety for participants; introducing this activity too early in a consulting session or before building trust risks creating resentment and hurt that can inhibit further sharing and openness.

Supplies: List of statements to read aloud (see below). Space large enough for participants to form straight line, shoulder-to-shoulder; there should be space in front of the line for participants to move forward at least 10 steps.

Participant setup: See below.

Instructions:

- Have participants form a straight line, shoulder to shoulder, on one side of the room, facing the opposite side.
- Share the overview statement from above, to help provide context for the exercise.
- Instruct the participants to listen to the following statements, and follow the instructions given:
 - When a statement is read that describes you, or partly describes you, walk to the other side of the room. If the statement that is read does not apply to you, remain where you are. Take note of who moves and who does not.
 - This activity should be done in silence and if anyone feels uncomfortable stepping forward and backward on any statement that is read, then please stay where you are, but remember the statement read. This is an introspective exercise and it’s important for you to understand how privilege affects your life, but it is not designed to make you share things which you don’t wish to share.
- Read the statements (see below) one at a time allowing time for participants to take a step.
- Allow a minutes for participants to take a mental note of each statement, before asking all participants to return to the same side of the room for the next statement.

Debrief: Use this activity to begin an in-depth discussion on diversity and what it means to have privilege. Ask questions carefully, and some only as rhetorical. Try to encourage an open discussion tailored to your purpose. Ask participants if they were surprised by things they did not know about their colleagues? Often, organizations believe they are not very diverse when

in fact they are – and often, individuals feel like they have nothing in common with others in their workplace. Were these ideas challenged? Were there areas in which they were shocked, ashamed, etc. that no one walked across? Why is it important to encourage diversity in an organization? What does it say about an organizational culture that is not inclusive of those without (or with) privilege? Did some people not walk across because they did not feel comfortable enough to do so? How many walked but wanted to clarify the why?

Privilege walk statements:

1. Please walk to the other side: If your ancestors were forced to come to the USA not by choice.
2. Please walk to the other side: If your primary ethnic identity is American.
3. Please walk to the other side: If you were ever called names because of your race, class, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation.
4. Please walk to the other side: If there were people of color who worked in your household as servants, gardeners, etc.
5. Please walk to the other side: If you were ever ashamed or embarrassed of your clothes, house, car, etc.
6. Please walk to the other side: If one or both of your parents has a college degree.
7. Please walk to the other side: If you were raised in an area, where there was prostitution, drug activity, etc.
8. Please walk to the other side: If you ever tried to change your appearance, mannerisms, or behavior to avoid being judged or ridiculed.
9. Please walk to the other side: If you studied the culture of your ancestors in elementary school.
10. Please walk to the other side: If you went to school speaking a language other than English.
11. Please walk to the other side: if there were more than 50 books in your house when you grew up.
12. Please walk to the other side: If you ever had to skip a meal or were hungry because there was not enough money to buy food when you were growing up.
13. Please walk to the other side: If one of your parents was unemployed or laid off, not by choice.
14. Please walk to the other side: If you attended private school or summer camp.
15. Please walk to the other side: If your family ever had to move because they could not afford the rent.
16. Please walk to the other side: If you were ever discouraged from academics or jobs because of race, class, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation.
17. Please walk to the other side: If you were encouraged to attend college by your parents.
18. Please walk to the other side: If you were raised in a single parent household.
19. Please walk to the other side: If your family owned the house, where you grew up.

20. Please walk to the other side: If you were ever offered a good job because of your association with a friend or family member.
21. Please walk to the other side: If you were ever denied employment because of your race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation.
22. Please walk to the other side: If you were paid less, treated fairly because of race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation.
23. Please walk to the other side: If you were ever accused of cheating or lying because of your race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation.
24. Please walk to the other side: If you ever inherited money or property.
25. Please walk to the other side: If you had to rely primarily on public transportation.
26. Please walk to the other side: If you were ever stopped or questioned by the police because of your race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation.
27. Please walk to the other side: If you were ever afraid of violence because of your race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation.
28. Please walk to the other side: If you were ever uncomfortable about a joke related to your race, ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation but felt unsafe to confront the situation.
29. Please walk to the other side: If you were ever the victim of violence related to your race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation.
30. Please walk to the other side: If your parents did not grow up in the United States.
31. Please walk to the other side: If your parents told you could be anything, you wanted to be.

Comfort Zones

Overview: This activity can be used like the Diversity/Privilege Walk to encourage discussion on organizational culture or it can be used with a focus on organizational change and how individuals respond to change within an organization.

Supplies: An open floorplan. Tape to mark two circles on the floor.

Participant setup: None.

Instructions:

- Mark two circles, one within the other, on the floor with the smallest large enough for everyone to stand within.
- Ask participants to stand outside both circles, making sure there is room to move outward and inward.

- Give these instructions to the group:
 - As an activity or statement is read, move in or out of these three areas, depending on how comfortable or uncomfortable you are with each statement. For example, an action that you love to do is read, maybe something like eating chocolate cake, you would move to the center of the circle. This is your comfort zone where you feel completely at ease.
 - If the action makes you a little uncomfortable, but you would at least try to do it, move to the second or outer circle. This would be your challenge zone.
 - If a statement is read and your first reaction is to think “No way, I would never do that!” Then you should move to the outermost area, the area you are in now, outside both circles. This is your danger zone. This could be something like singing the national anthem at the Super Bowl.
- Give the group easy, benign statement at the beginning. Suggestions include: Singing in front of your friends » Giving a presentation » Acting in a play » Playing a sport » Holding a tarantula » Babysitting young children » Petting a lion » Sky diving » Reading in front of a group » Talking on the telephone.
- After the group gets used to the activity, you can make the statements more intense, relating to the overall work-related purpose of the activity and/or diversity and inclusion. For example: Leading a team building activity for a group of 50 peers » Giving a speech in an auditorium in front of 400 people » Suggesting an innovative approach to an existing process » (See above statements from the Diversity/Privilege walk)
 - Be careful not to single people out or choose activities/items that will have negative consequences for employees. For example, do not use “Kick a field goal” or “Catch a pass” with a group of NFL players.

Debrief: After the activity, come back to the circle and have them share what they noticed about the activity. Was everyone in the same spot with every activity? Why? Were there any activities where you were uncomfortable, but someone else on your team was comfortable? Did you learn anything new about someone else in the group? Did you learn anything new about your leader, if present? How can we help each other when we feel uncomfortable with an activity? Are there some people in the group who seem more adept at handling new things? How can these people be utilized in fostering change within the organization (rhetorical)?