

Chapter 5

Interactive Meetings: Making Them Work

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To work effectively with interactive methods, you need to do several things. All of it will be worthwhile. You need to:

- First, overcome your own resistance. Then overcome the resistance of the group. You may also need to deal with resistance from supervisors or other authority figures. All of these are ongoing processes. This is so important that chapter 3 is all about it.
- Find or create a space that accommodates an interactive meeting.
- Design an interactive agenda.
- Implement the agenda with skill.
- “Process” the exercises effectively.
- Make it work for the long term.

Arranging the Setting

The physical setting for a group meeting has a direct impact on the level of cooperation or resistance that both the group and the facilitator will feel, and therefore has a powerful impact on the success of the meeting. If people are in an uncomfortable environment or one that presents some challenges, they are less able to relax and follow the agenda you’ve designed. Everything you can do to bring the space closer to the ideal will have a positive effect on the group experience.

If possible, become familiar with the meeting room before creating the agenda so that you can choose exercises the group can do in the space available. If you are not able to see the room beforehand, try to get a description of the layout and find out whether you can move furniture and whether the materials you need will be available.

The settings we describe here can range from living rooms to classrooms to boardrooms, and we are mainly thinking in terms of small to medium-size groups (between 6 and 30 people). Remember, however, that the Interactive Meeting Format can work with groups of up to 100, and can be implemented at some level for a group of any size.

The Ideal Setting

The ideal setting for an interactive meeting of a small to medium-size group is a quiet, private, and comfortable space where people can sit in a horseshoe shape—not around a table—and have some room to move around. The facilitator should have room to stand at the front of the horseshoe, with a board or flip chart to write on. (A flip chart is best because it allows you to keep a record of the group’s work.) Having a clock is helpful, and if you plan to do BRAINSTORMING (p. 385), the rules can be posted.



For some meetings, having food available sets a welcoming atmosphere. If people may be arriving hungry, having food will help them be more focused. At other times, food may be a distraction that will hinder the progress of the meeting. Consider whether or not having food will help or hurt your meeting, and arrange for it if you think it will help.

The Less-than-Ideal Setting

If the space is crowded, dirty, too hot, or too cold, if there is noise, no open space to move around in, or a sense that someone might walk in at any moment, these conditions will have a negative impact on the group's ability to function effectively. You might not be able to control what room a group will meet in, but you should do whatever you can to arrange a setting that will help the group to succeed.

What to Do. If the meeting room is set up with chairs in rows or around a table, change the furniture arrangement if possible. Move tables or desks aside and pull the chairs into a circle. If the tables or

desks can't be moved, perhaps you can bring the chairs into a circle in a corner of the room and post flip chart paper on the wall in that corner.

Also, do what you can before the meeting begins to make the room comfortable and free of distractions. Clean up any trash or items left over from other meetings. Post “Do Not Disturb” signs if necessary, and close the door when the meeting starts. Be sure you know how to regulate the temperature. Think ahead about materials needed for the group and be sure that arrangements have been made to provide these items.

Table in the Middle. The traditional meeting culture is centered on “bringing people to the table.” This element is so well established that, in many settings, the table is actually bolted to the floor. The table, however, often functions as a barrier between people, allowing group members to hide from one another, and it can serve to mask inattention. Furthermore, many of the exercises in this book that work to energize and focus a group cannot be done with a table in the middle of the room.

If at all possible, get rid of the table, move it out of the way, or find a meeting room that does not have a table. As you practice the skills in this book, you will see the dramatic difference in energy, focus, and productivity between meetings that happen around a table and those that take place in a room with open floor space.

Recognizing, however, that not all settings are ideal, chapter 13 contains exercises that work with people seated at desks or tables or in an “audience-style” setting.

Be prepared for resistance related to removing the table; people will say, for example, that they need the table so they can take notes. This is only true if all they have to write on is loose paper, and you can anticipate and remove this issue by having clipboards, pads of paper, or books available to provide surfaces for writing.

Designing the Agenda

Chapter 4 describes the components of the Interactive Meeting Format in detail; this chapter explains the most important considerations when you are working with those components to design an agenda.

There are two ways to design an agenda based on the Interactive Meeting Format:

- Do it quickly, skimming the exercises in this book and choosing those that will fill up the time. Choose a Warm-up Question like “How was your day?” Pick a simple Springboard Exercise. Then plunge ahead into the “real work” of the meeting.
- Design the agenda carefully and thoughtfully, choosing exercises and activities that will help the group to meet its goals.

If you want your group to grow and change in positive ways and to be effective and productive in its tasks, choose the second way.

The ideal agenda anticipates and structures both the issues the group is facing and the work they need to accomplish on a given day. It shapes a coherent meeting in which the purposes are clear to participants and the elements build logically upon each other. The various pieces of the agenda should be connected thematically, and the themes should be a reflection of the meeting's goals. The pieces lead-

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ing up to the Work Section should help the group to anticipate and perform their work effectively, while the Work Section can be structured to help the group deal with its issues as people accomplish other tasks.

There is a template at the end of this chapter that you can copy and use for creating agendas. We suggest that you keep a loose-leaf notebook holding both blank copies of the template and your meeting agendas, filed in chronological order for future reference.

Here are the guidelines for thoughtful agenda design.

Clearly Identify the Purposes of the Meeting

To begin, list the major goals for the meeting. For example, some goals might be:

- Helping people get to know each other in the first meeting of an ongoing group
- Presenting information to the group and engaging everyone in discussion, such as in a one-time drug-abuse prevention workshop
- Accomplishing tasks related to a work project or an event the group is planning
- Making a decision about the group's course of action
- Working with a complex emotional issue (such as trust, fear of failure, or lack of motivation) in a group that has been meeting for a while
- Dealing with dysfunctional group dynamics (such as cliques, a few people dominating the conversation, or people chronically arriving late).

Carefully consider which tasks and/or issues are calling for attention most urgently. Will the meeting be primarily task-oriented? Are there conflicts or group dynamics that need to be addressed or resolved before the group can accomplish its tasks? What are your goals in addressing these issues and tasks? What are the barriers to accomplishing your goals?

Be Aware of Individual and Group Dynamics

Successful agenda design for any group involves carefully considering individuals' feelings and the group dynamics. It is always important to take into consideration what may be happening below the surface.

In an unformed group, which can be either a one-time group or a new group, you will know little or nothing about individual participants and the dynamics among people will be undeveloped. Nevertheless, you can examine what you do know and think about how to work with it. For example, in a mandatory one-time teacher training session that is taking place after school, a facilitator could reasonably anticipate that:

- Some participants will be tired.
- Some may feel resentful at being required to attend the session.
- Some will have doubts regarding the facilitator's ability to offer useful information.

With this awareness, the facilitator can design an agenda that addresses these sensitivities. For example:

- In the Introduction, acknowledge the time of day and express appreciation for the effort that participants are making in attending the session.
- To surface the feelings and attitudes that people are bringing to the session, use a Warm-up

Question such as, “Say a word that describes what you were thinking about this session on your way here today.”

- Use a Springboard Exercise that energizes people, and process it in a way that makes useful connections between the experience of the exercise and the work of the day.
- Plan a Work Section that builds on the strength and experience of the teachers involved.

In a formed group (that is, a group that has been together for a while), you will know a lot about the individuals and the dynamics that exist among people—alliances, tensions, attractions, etc. To design an effective agenda, you need to recognize a group’s strengths and weaknesses and be able to anticipate the sensitivities of individuals. Before you plunge into the details of planning the meeting, think about the group and its members. The areas to think about will vary depending on the group and its purpose, but in general some questions to consider are:

- How committed are people to meeting the group’s goals? If there is a wide range of commitment, how does the group handle this?
- How well is the group moving toward meeting its goals? In a classroom setting, how well are individuals learning the material?
- What are the varied skill levels of individuals for the tasks required? What are the coping mechanisms of those who appear to be less skilled? How does the whole group cope with disparity of skills?
- Are some people feeling overwhelmed by their tasks or afraid they will not be able to accomplish what is expected of them? If so, is this a source of dysfunction in the group?
- What issues are individuals dealing with in their lives outside of the group, and how are these situations affecting the group? Is anyone in the group facing a crisis?
- How are the members of the group getting along with one another?
- Is the group factionalized? What are the issues that divide people?
- Is someone in the group playing the role of scapegoat?
- Where are the tensions, attractions, alliances, or isolations present in the group?
- Which issues are on the surface and which are beneath the surface?

Depending on the purpose of the group, you may focus more on personal issues and less on group issues, or vice versa. Considering these questions will help you to create a design that moves the group forward through their issues into richer and more productive work.

Choose Appropriate Exercises

To make the best choices for your group, you should become familiar with a broad range of exercises and know how they can be processed. Then, with many interactive techniques to choose from, consider which will best address the dynamics of the group and help the group move toward the fulfillment of its goals. Once you have identified the dynamics or tasks that you want to address, there are a number of ways to select the appropriate approach.

- **Mirror the Dynamic.** You can choose an exercise that mirrors the dynamic you see in the group. For example, when you want to raise the issue of factions in the group, you could choose an exercise like AMOEBA TAG (p. 258), which breaks people up into small, competing groups.
- **Create the Opposite Dynamic.** Conversely, you can select an exercise that creates the dynamic you would like to foster in the group. For example, when you want to illustrate the importance of letting people speak without being interrupted, you might use GROUP COUNT (p. 221), which

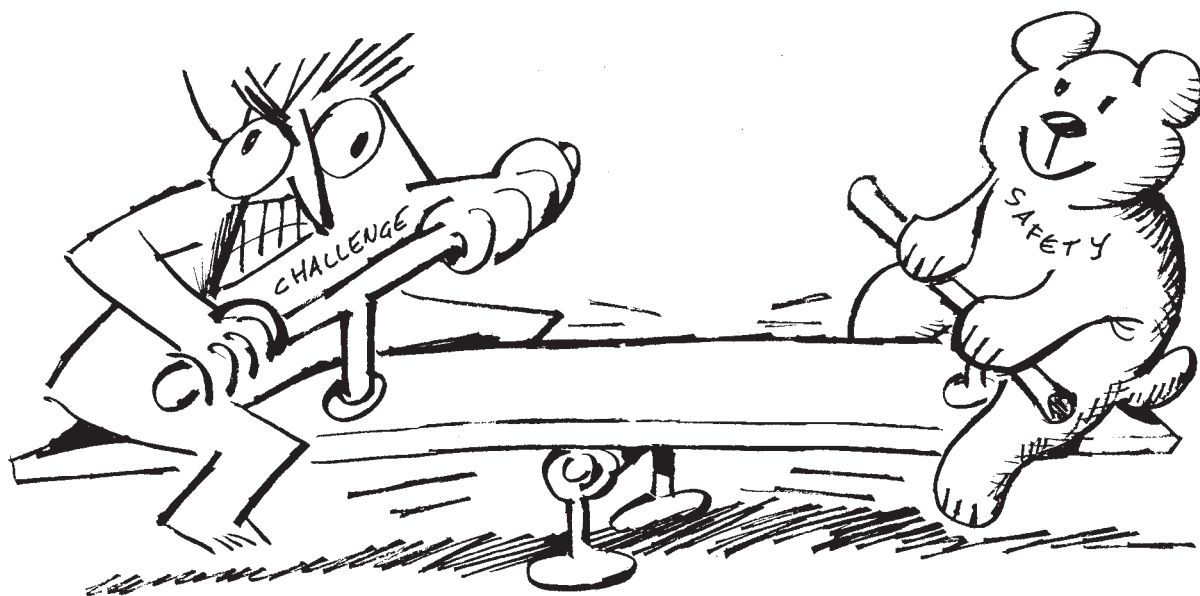
requires that group members not speak at the same time.

- **Inform the Group's Behavior.** You can select an exercise that gives the group a better understanding of their work for that day or a greater awareness of the importance of their group's mission. For example, for a group that is preparing to host a large-scale gathering and needs to practice making people feel comfortable, a good choice would be *FILL THE SPACE, SHAKE THE HAND* (p. 282), which requires people to reach out to each other and shake hands. For a group that is looking at the issue of homelessness, the facilitator might use the exercise *THE WIND BLOWS* (p. 377), which illustrates how it feels to be left out and stranded without a resource that most people have.

In any exercise you select (in fact, in any action a group takes), various dynamics will emerge. The key is to design a format that creates a context for the exploration of the issues, information, or dynamics that the group needs to explore in order to move toward the fulfillment of its goals.

Be Aware of Risk

Asking people to participate in an interactive exercise is asking them to take a risk with their self-esteem and their image in the group. The risk can be so small as to be almost nonexistent, as in the



case of a group that knows each other well and feels comfortable together. Or the risk can be great—for example, if members of the group do not know each other, want very much to be accepted by others, and are fearful that they will not be.

An exercise defeats its purpose if it presents too great a risk for too many people. If people are made uncomfortable and asked to share too much in a group that is not ready to support them, there is a danger that individuals will be hurt rather than helped by their participation in the group.

Determining what level of risk a group can handle involves forethought and consideration. For example, the Warm-up Question “What was your favorite class in high school?” is low-risk for a group of college graduates but high-risk for a group of people who did not finish high school.

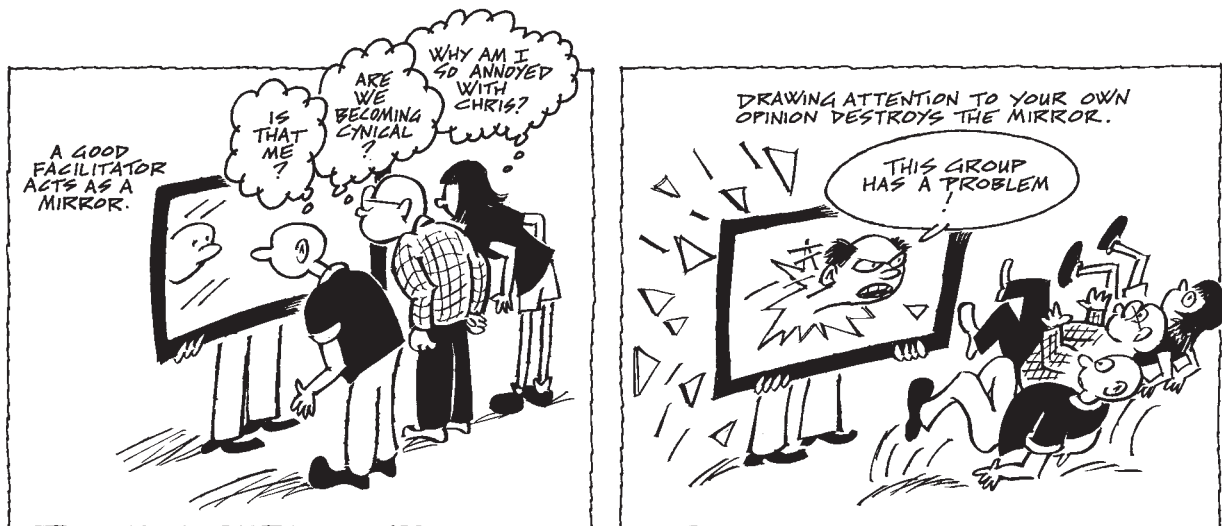
The more you know about individuals in the group and their vulnerabilities, and about issues affecting the whole group at a given time, the better equipped you are to identify the appropriate level of risk. If the meeting you are planning is likely to include individuals you do not know, this automatically lowers the acceptable level of risk. If you do not know the group at all, you should keep the risk level very low.

However, while you want to avoid challenging a group beyond its capacity, this does not mean using only exercises that present little or no challenge. As a group develops and gets to know each other, there may be times when you want to push the level of risk higher in order to dig deeper into the issues facing the group. You are striving for a balance between challenge and safety, with the presumption that it is better to err, slightly, on the side of safety.

As you consider how much to ask of your group in terms of risk, be alert to the dynamic of your own resistance (see p. 26). If you think that the group is not ready for a certain level of risk, consider whether your own resistance may be clouding your understanding of how best to address the needs and goals of the group.

Be Subtle

If a group is to develop into a cohesive, functional unit, members must see with their own eyes and draw their own lessons. Your job is to hold a mirror up to the group. When the design and facilitation are subtle and insightful, the group sees itself in that mirror and people adjust their behavior according to what



they like and don't like about what they see. However, when subtlety is lacking, the group sees the intention of the facilitator rather than seeing itself, and the effectiveness of the exercise is diminished.

It is best if the group's issues and new perceptions and understandings are brought to the surface by group members themselves, rather than by the facilitator. You should strive, therefore, not to select exercises that broadcast to the group what you think the issues are.

For example: We frequently use a WORDSTORM (p. 413) to bring issues to a group's consciousness. This exercise involves putting a word on the flip chart and having the group call out related words that come to mind. Being subtle in choosing the central word is key to the success of the exercise. If a group is having problems trusting each other and you want to surface this issue, doing a WORDSTORM on "trust" may at first seem like a good idea. However, this will make it clear to the group that you think trust is an issue among them. Being thus labeled can make group members feel attacked and may cause some people to withdraw. Even worse, it may become a negative point of reference for the group and feed into a perception of themselves that is not helpful in moving forward. Instead of the too-direct word "trust," you could do a WORDSTORM on the word "friendship." This will not reveal your intentions, and the group will be more likely to participate undistracted by an awareness of your motives. With skilled processing, the issue of trust will come out of the word "friendship" spontaneously, originating from the group rather than from the facilitator.

The ability to be subtle is particularly important in ongoing groups whose dynamics are fully formed. The farther away you can get from the point you want to make while still getting back to that point, the more effective the exercise will be. The real learning, change, and growth take place for the group in the space between doing the exercise and the process of discovery that the group goes through in order to discern its meaning.

Keep Your Designs Fresh

With an ongoing group, overuse of an exercise will eventually flatten the experience; yet an exercise can be repeated many times and still remain fresh and unpredictable. Here are some ways to keep useful exercises working for your group.

- **Use the Same Exercise but Process It Differently.** An exercise used with a new group will often play out very differently with the same group later on when people know each other better. Group dynamics that were too high-risk to bring up in discussion the first time the group does an exercise may be ripe for surfacing another time. You may also be able to see and point out changes in the group through changes in the way they relate to the exercise. Each time you process a familiar exercise, you can focus on aspects that have not been raised previously.
- **Make Subtle Changes in the Exercise.** An exercise can be kept new and interesting by slightly altering the directions you give to the group. For example, consider the HUMAN KNOT (p. 332), an exercise in which a small group of people become knotted up and must get disentangled. You can significantly change the group's experience of the exercise by assigning one person as the leader and telling everyone else to follow their instructions, or by asking several of the participants to close their eyes during the exercise, or by setting the exercise up as a competition between two groups. With such variations, you can make a basic exercise more complex and higher risk. This book includes many variations that we suggest for the exercises. We encourage you to make thoughtful and purposeful variations of your own. Interactive exercises are tools to create a desired experience for your group. As long as you are clear about what it is you want to communicate through an exercise, feel free to adjust the exercise to suit your purpose. See scenario 7, "A Small Change Creates a Fresh Experience."

Scenario 7: A Small Change Creates a Fresh Experience

An ongoing group had used the exercise ZIP ZAP ZUP (p. 182) previously as a way to generate energy and illustrate the flow of energy in the group.

Annette, the group's facilitator, had just learned about a potential obstacle to the success of the group's current project, which had been fairly straightforward up to this point. Preparing for a meeting at which she planned to inform the group of this complication and brainstorm ways to cope with it, Annette thought about how the group's even flow of work was being disrupted. She remembered how the group had enjoyed getting into the rhythm of ZIP ZAP ZUP, and it occurred to her that a variation on this exercise might serve to illustrate their current situation and help them get focused on dealing with it. For the Springboard Exercise, therefore, she thought she might try ZIP ZAP ZUP WITH FOOT-STAMPING: each time someone said "Zup," they simultaneously had to stamp their foot.

Before deciding to use this variation, Annette tried it out with some family members; her guess that the foot-stamping requirement would make the exercise significantly more difficult proved to be correct. In the group, Annette introduced the exercise and said that anyone who made a mistake would be out. People were amazed at how hard it was to stay in the game with this extra step to remember. The exercise took very little time, because everyone was out in a matter of moments.

Processing focused on how the addition of this seemingly minor requirement had such a huge impact on their ability to succeed at the exercise. Annette asked if people had formulated any strategies to remember the extra step; some people felt that with more time and practice, they would have been able to do much better. Others talked about strategies they had used in other areas of their lives to change ingrained habits.

Later in the meeting, as the group discussed their project and what to do about the new situation confronting them, insights from the processing of ZIP ZAP ZUP cast some light on how the group might take on this additional challenge. Annette brought up some of the ideas that people had offered for coping with the necessity of change, and these ideas helped the group think more deeply about their current dilemma.

Create Your Own Exercises

There may be times when the issue you want to raise in the group can be illustrated best with a custom-made exercise. To begin designing an exercise, think about the particular dynamic or issue you want to raise; then think about creating a similar or opposite dynamic through an exercise. Scenario 8 illustrates a custom-made exercise that mimics a group's dysfunctional behavior.

Scenario 8: Using a Familiar Experience

Robert was working with a group that had some very vocal members and some members who hardly spoke at all. He suspected that the quieter members of the group were being overshadowed by the more vocal members. He wanted the group to work on this dynamic so they could create an atmosphere where everyone's ideas could be heard.

Robert reviewed all the exercises that he knew, but he could not find one that fit the issue he

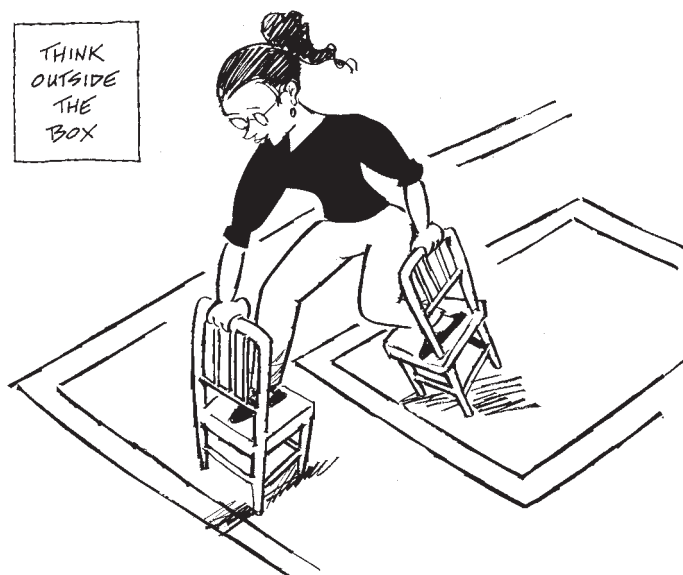
wanted to raise. He thought about the dynamic in the group: it seemed that some people always went along with what the more vocal members of the group said, even when Robert expected them to disagree. He had the sense that the quieter members never got a chance to decide what they really thought before the other members had already taken a firm position. It reminded him of being pulled downstream by a powerful current.

He decided to have them act out this dynamic by singing the old song “Row, Row, Row Your Boat.” He split the group up into three sections, and had them sing the song as a round. Since the more vocal members of the group always sat next to each other in the circle, it was easy to put them in the same section. As the group sang the song, one section was much louder than the others. In fact, they were almost yelling instead of singing. As the other sections tried to join in the round, they got drowned out by the loud section. Before long, the whole group was singing the song together, instead of as a round.

In processing the exercise, Robert asked the group why they had been unable to keep the song going as a round. Some people said they had gotten confused. Even though they had started singing separately, all they could hear was the loud section of the group, and before they knew it they had lost their ability to keep their own time. Robert asked the group if this sort of thing ever happened in their work together. After a bit of a silence, one of the more vocal members of the group said that she thought maybe others were quiet a lot during group discussions because she always had a lot to say. She said she thought everyone should speak their own mind. Robert closed the exercise by encouraging everyone to hold onto their own thoughts and opinions rather than just going “gently down the stream” with the loudest voice. He also suggested that the group make room in the boat (the group) for everyone, and give others a chance to think and talk too.

“Row, Row, Row Your Boat” had been a perfect fit for the issue the group was facing. It allowed the dynamics in the group to come to the surface in an unexpected, indirect way. If you have a good sense of the dynamics in the group, you can use experiences of all sorts to surface them.

Exercises can come from anywhere. What’s important is that an exercise provide the group with a genuine experience and useful information about their work or the challenges they face. In designing an exercise, be sure that you know what you are trying to illustrate and that the risk level of the exercise is appropriate for the group. Consider carefully what is likely to happen, both positive and negative, during the exercise. Are the potential outcomes the ones you want? Develop clear directions about



how the exercise will be conducted and, if possible, try it out with co-workers before bringing it to the group.

Being innovative with interactive techniques takes time, practice, and openness to your own creativity. It also requires you to take some risks, and you should expect that some of your innovations will succeed and some will fail. If an exercise does not work as you had hoped and planned, give yourself points for trying, and recognize that our mistakes can often teach us more than our successes. Being able to pick yourself up after failed attempts at innovation and evaluate what went wrong is an important part of the learning process.

Take It Slow

This book describes many variations of exercises, each representing some adjustment that changes the dynamic or risk level. In general, it is best to begin with the basic form of an exercise and to save the more complex or challenging versions until the group has had experience with the basic exercise and with each other. However, there may be times when a variation suits the purpose better than the original version. As always, your decision should be driven by the group's needs.

Keep It Simple

Sometimes facilitators who are beginning to learn the *Moving Beyond Icebreakers* approach become caught up in complexity: choosing the more involved exercises over the simple ones, or creating elaborate exercises that take a lot of time. However, less is often more with interactive exercises; simplicity is more effective than intricacy. A sure way to increase resistance in a group and to undermine the value of interactive work is to use lengthy exercises that make people suspect the group is spinning its wheels. As you design agendas, keep the expenditure of time in proportion to the value of what you are trying to achieve. If you can reach your goal with either an exercise that takes five minutes or one that takes 15 minutes, using the five-minute approach is almost always preferable.

Be Inclusive

You should choose exercises in which all group members can participate. If some members have physical limitations that make participation difficult, make it a priority to design agendas that will include them. See Appendix B: Adapting Interactive Exercises for Physical Limitations. Similarly, you can adapt exercises to make them work for group members with mental or emotional limitations.

Facilitating the Meeting

The skill with which you are able to facilitate a meeting is even more important than the agenda design. A good facilitator can take a mediocre agenda and make it into a highly effective experience for the participants. On the other hand, a facilitator who is overcome by resistance, or one who either is unaware of the powerful potentials of the group experience or is not committed to maximizing them, can take the best agenda and achieve little or nothing with it.

This section describes the skills you need to facilitate an interactive agenda effectively.

Remain Aware of Your Purpose

If you have designed the agenda with care, forethought, and a clear purpose in mind, you will be much better able to retain faith in the importance of what you are asking the group to do. Knowing why you designed the agenda as you did and what you expect to accomplish will provide you with a firm foundation as you introduce each element on the agenda and lead the group through it. Solid awareness of

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your purpose will allow you to maintain the strength it takes to ride out the resistance coming from the group or from yourself. (See chapter 3.)

Give Good Instructions

Without good instructions, an exercise may not work at all, and if it does it is less likely to meet your goals. In a few cases (such as PAIR TAG, p. 270), an exercise can actually be dangerous if people are not well instructed. Before you lead an exercise for the first time, make sure you understand the instructions and can visualize how the exercise works. Practice giving the instructions in your own words. If possible, practice with someone else who can ask questions and point out difficulties and potential misunderstandings.

Observe the Group's Dynamics

While you are facilitating, try to be a keen observer of what is happening around you. Be receptive to any messages that the group's actions communicate. Be aware of how people are interacting or failing to interact. Try to determine where the leadership in the group is coming from. Is the leadership static, or does it flow through different people? Note the group or individual characteristics that are revealed as people go through the session's activities. Remember the ideas, perceptions, or understandings that are expressed by the group or come to mind for you. By paying attention to the details of what happens and what is said, you will gain important information that will empower you to bring the group to deeper levels of connection, understanding, and commitment to fulfilling its goals.

It is often helpful to take notes as you observe. For example, you might jot down a few key words from each response to the Warm-up Question, or note who volunteered to be first during the Springboard Exercise, who went last, or other actions that might be revealing of group dynamics or individuals' states of mind. This information is often very helpful in conducting an effective processing of the exercise. (Processing is discussed in detail below.)

Know When to Participate and When to Observe

Facilitators are also members of the group, and as such should always participate in Name Exercises, Warm-up Questions, and Evaluation Exercises. For most Springboard Exercises, however, it is more effective if you observe rather than participate. As a new facilitator you will need to observe in order to process effectively, and as you become more skilled, you will want to be an observer so that you can make adaptations to take advantage of dynamics as they emerge. Moreover, for exercises that require physical activity, such as the tag-style exercises in chapter 14, you need to enforce the rules from the sidelines to ensure that no one gets hurt.

Nevertheless, in some situations it may be important for you to participate, and there are some exercises in which you can easily participate and observe simultaneously. For example, the facilitator should always join in on *THE WIND BLOWS* (p. 377).

Enjoy Yourself

While your job as facilitator is to maintain order and keep the meeting moving along, remember that humor and jokes are not only OK, but are in fact desirable in creating a positive atmosphere for group work. Letting your own personality and style come out as you facilitate is one of the powerful and pleasurable aspects of the interactive process.

Don't Panic if What You Planned Doesn't Work

There may be times when you give clear instructions but the group, for whatever reason, does not fol-

low them. Rather than interrupting with corrections, watch how the group deals with the exercise. Then use what you've observed, including the fact that the instructions were not followed, in the processing discussion. As you become more experienced, you will learn how to take advantage of this kind of situation, and you will come to see that sometimes both you and the group might learn more from an exercise that does not work as expected than from one that does.

Processing the Exercises

By “processing” we mean leading a discussion and/or making observations about a completed exercise in order to draw understanding from it. Processing can help people to think in a creative way about a decision they must make, appreciate the importance of their work, understand a dynamic that exists in the group, or learn some new piece of information.

Format for Processing

A general format for processing an exercise involves:

- Asking a few good questions that will spark discussion in the group about their experience of the exercise and how it relates to their experiences in the group. The best starting question is “What did people think of that exercise?” because it allows the group to create its own agenda and express its own understanding.
- Providing your own comments about why you selected that particular exercise and what you thought it illustrated about the group (based on your observations and/or the comments of other group members).

In certain circumstances, you may decide that the best approach is to do only one of these pieces—that is, to ask questions of the group but not to comment yourself, or to comment without asking questions. For example, in a one-time group where there are no formed dynamics to surface, it is often appropriate to limit your processing to a few comments making the point(s) you want to get across. In processing a Warm-up Question, you would generally only make some comments to sum up people's responses.

The discussion can look at areas such as:

- How people dealt with the challenges posed by the exercise.
- What the end result was (whether expected or unexpected).
- How the learning from the exercise relates to the work the group is doing or the issues they are facing.

Anything that happens during the exercise could be included in the processing, and the variability of human responses to experience virtually guarantees material for processing of any exercise.

Be Aware of Resistance

The few moments allotted for processing an exercise are when you are most likely to feel the impact of your own resistance. When you are experiencing a high level of resistance, much of your attention and focus will be directed inward on your own doubts, fears, and nervousness, rather than outward on the group dynamics and learning opportunities that are present. This inevitably leads to missing obvious process points. A garrulous facilitator in this situation may “overprocess” by talking more than necessary about the exercise, whereas a more reserved facilitator may “underprocess,” saying very little and missing valuable and sometimes obvious opportunities to draw understanding from the exercise. In

addition, when you are in the grip of resistance you are more likely to be thrown off when an exercise “doesn’t work” as expected, and you may forget that the exercise often can be more powerfully processed than one that “does work.”

It is important to be aware of your level of resistance so that you can work to focus your attention outward on what is happening around you. It will help you to do this if:

- before the exercise, you understand clearly what you want the group to learn from it, and
- during the exercise, you observe carefully what happens and what is said.

How Much Processing Is Enough?

You need to develop the ability to judge how much processing work the group needs around the issues raised by the exercise. Sometimes it will be appropriate to lead an in-depth discussion of the group dynamics that emerged during the exercise. At other times, a few comments may be all that is needed. Occasionally, you may decide not to process an exercise at all, but instead use the energy generated by the exercise to flow right into the next section of the agenda. See scenario 9, “Three Ways to Process PAIR TAG,” for different pictures of how an exercise can be processed.

Your sense of the appropriate amount of processing may change during the exercise itself. Be prepared to respond to critical dynamics that emerge during an exercise, even if you had planned not to process the exercise at all. On the other hand, be prepared to end the processing of an exercise after just a few comments if the lesson of the exercise is already clear to the group. Stay in the moment, remaining as aware as possible of what is happening in the group.

It is very easy to underprocess an exercise, spending so little time on processing that the group misses the learning opportunities inherent in the experience. Conversely, with so much that can be learned, you may be tempted to overprocess, to prolong the processing beyond the point where people can remain engaged. Pay attention to how many group members are participating; some people have a lower tolerance than others for reflecting on nuances of an experience. It is ideal to end the processing while most people are still thinking and attentive.

Processing should never take the form of the facilitator speaking at length. When you are speaking, you have about a two-minute window to make your point(s). Maintain an awareness of that window and how much time is left before it closes. You can reopen the window by making a good joke or asking a good question, and once it’s reopened you can make additional comments, but be aware that the window is always on its way down again.

Each time you work with an exercise, you are building up your sense of how to do it and learning how to gauge the needs of the group so that your processing brings out the most valuable lessons and is neither too much nor too little.

Scenario 9: Three Ways to Process PAIR TAG

A. Processing with a Few Comments

Keisha was preparing her group to run workshops at a conference. The young people would each be facilitating in teams of two. She wanted group members to practice working together and supporting their partners, even when they were not facilitating themselves. Keisha decided to use PAIR TAG (p. 270) to illustrate her point.

She asked the group to form two lines facing each other, then explained that each person would be playing tag with the person directly across from them. Keisha watched and enforced the rules as everyone fast-walked around the room, laughing and hiding from their partners.

When it came time to process the exercise, Keisha said that PAIR TAG was like co-facilitating. The individuals on each team would be taking turns leading their workshop group, passing the agenda back and forth between them. But unlike playing PAIR TAG, when people are co-facilitating they need to work together throughout the meeting. When one person passes off the leadership to the other, the first person can't run away and hide; they need to stay present in every way, supporting and helping their co-facilitator.

Then Keisha had each pair go off and practice their workshops. She asked them to be especially aware of how they would share the agenda, how they would pass it off to each other, and how they would keep the energy flowing between them.

B. Processing with an In-Depth Discussion

Luis's youth group had just completed a community barbecue that had not been entirely successful. Although turnout for the event had been good, the group had spent much of the day bickering among themselves. The grills had been left unattended at several points, and some of the youth who gave speeches were flat and uninspired in their delivery.

As Luis prepared the agenda for a meeting to evaluate the barbecue, he tried to think of an exercise that would mirror the dynamic he had seen in the group during the event. He decided to try PAIR TAG. He thought that he would process the exercise by talking about the chaotic environment that PAIR TAG created and relating it to the way the group had worked together at the barbecue. He also planned to make points about people shirking their responsibilities (like not cooking the burgers) by passing them off on other people.

When the group played PAIR TAG, Luis observed a great many behaviors that seemed related to the current dynamic in the group. Ron and Steven insisted on running, though Luis kept asking them not to. Steven ran into Susan and stepped on her foot. Several pairs just stood in one place and tagged each other, rather than actually engaging in the exercise. Toya left the room to go to the bathroom, leaving her partner with nothing to do but sit on the sidelines.

After a few minutes, Luis settled the group down and began to work with what he had observed. He asked the group the following questions to stimulate discussion: "Did people enjoy this exercise? Why or why not?" "Why were some people standing still?" "Were the rules being followed?" "Did people feel safe?" "What was the energy in the group like during the exercise?" "Is this the same type of energy that the group had during the barbecue?"

As the group discussed their experience of PAIR TAG, it became clear that several people were taking the position that the exercise was stupid. Luis sensed a dynamic emerging that caring about the work of the group was also stupid. This was making it difficult for those who were truly invested in the work to act on their convictions, and it was letting those with a negative attitude take over.

Susan commented that when Steven stepped on her foot, she felt like quitting the exercise so she

wouldn't get hurt again. Then Toya said that she had left her job of grilling at the barbecue because she'd almost burned her hand when someone jostled her and she didn't want to take any more chances of getting hurt.

Luis closed the processing of the exercise by making some comments. He pointed out that when people are not invested in the exercise or in the work of the group, it creates an unsafe environment where people can get hurt. When people don't feel safe, they are not able to take risks and try new things; Luis wondered if this explained the lackluster performance of those who had given speeches, as well as Toya's situation. He concluded by saying that he hoped they could create an environment where people felt safe and could work together.

Through his processing of PAIR TAG, Luis brought out some important issues. He knew that he would have to continue to work with group on these issues if he was going to change the dynamic that was developing. He learned from the exercise that he would need to design future meetings to push those who were not invested in the group's work to either get on board or leave the group.

C. Using PAIR TAG without Processing

Ellen and Dan were working with their group to organize a student/teacher workshop at their high school. In the Work Section of the agenda they planned to do BRAINSTORMING on the positive and negative aspects of student/teacher relationships. From past experience, they knew that this group had a hard time with Brainstorms; they tended to censor their ideas and feel shy about yelling them out in front of the group.

After the Introduction and Warm-up Question, Ellen and Dan had the group play a quick game of PAIR TAG. While the energy was high and the group was laughing and having a good time, the facilitators stopped the exercise and quickly started the Brainstorm. Still huffing and puffing from PAIR TAG, group members began shouting out their thoughts about student/teacher relationships at school.

Ellen and Dan had decided not to do a formal processing of PAIR TAG. Instead, they used the energy it created and the in-the-body experience of the back-and-forth nature of relationships to inform the BRAINSTORMING session.

Use Subtlety in Processing

On p. 59 we discuss the importance of being subtle when you select exercises; the points made in that discussion apply equally here. When the facilitator "names" the group's dynamics directly, this can eclipse the group's own process of learning and understanding.

As a facilitator, you have the power to determine an agenda and keep the group focused on it, enforce guidelines, and keep time limits. However, when it comes to changing group dynamics and creating new understanding, you have much less direct power to impact the group. Achieving this kind of deep change is accomplished most effectively when the group members come to a new understanding through their own collective and individual thought processes.

Your primary role is to create a field of experience where the group members can deduce, through their own perceptions, new understandings of themselves, the dynamics of the group, or the issues

and societal dynamics that are the focus of the group. For an example of how this can work, see scenario 10.

Scenario 10: Subtle Processing of a Warm-up Question

Hanad's group was organizing a conflict resolution session between rival neighborhoods. In a planning meeting several days before the event, Hanad opened with the Warm-up Question, "Why did you want to be involved in this project?" Most members of the group cited various goals the group had set for the session, such as saving lives and creating peace in their community. But one young woman, Danielle, said that she was just coming to watch the fights.

Hanad had run into problems with Danielle's attitude in the past. In previous meetings he had tried to address her attitude on the spot by confronting her about the negative energy she was putting into the group, but he had found that this approach served only to further cement her in the role of the tough, uncommitted one. Occasionally his lectures seemed to make her even more removed and obstinate.

This time, he took a different approach. Instead of addressing the negative tone of Danielle's answer, he decided to try working with the information she had put out, and to be careful not to force her into her typical role. When processing the Warm-up Question, he said, "It sounds like people got involved in this project for a lot of different reasons. I heard people say that if we do this thing well we can make some important changes in this community. We can stop people from getting hurt; we can save lives; we can make it safer for young people to go where they want without looking over their shoulders. I also heard that there's the potential for fights and violence, so we really need to have our act together. We need to take the steps necessary to ensure everyone's safety, and to be sure we're putting out the right message to those who come. We also need to have our eyes open. So, if people in this group have information about possible conflicts, or concerns about how the session is set up, we should get those things out in the open so we can address them."

Hanad then made some adjustments in his agenda for the meeting. He made time for reviewing the safety measures the group had in place, the logistics of the session, and the way that the group intended to create a peaceful atmosphere. He asked for input from the group on each aspect of the event, which led to a discussion about those who might come who were notorious for stirring up trouble. Danielle said that she'd heard some guys talking trash about the session. The group strategized about how they would deal with these guys, and how they could help them feel invested in the success of the session.

By being less direct in his approach, Hanad had succeeded in keeping Danielle on board with the initiative. Even if Danielle's comment was motivated only by a poor attitude, by addressing her answer in an indirect way Hanad avoided freezing her in a negative role in the group. More importantly, he used the negative information she'd put out in a constructive way. The fact that Danielle expressed concern about the safety of the event, however negatively, was a signpost pointing toward important information for the group.

Being subtle and indirect in processing does not mean ignoring the information or dynamics in the group, but instead dealing with them in a non-confrontational, constructive, group-oriented way.

There is No One Correct Way to Process an Exercise

This book gives specific processing ideas for exercises based on our experiences in a variety of settings. However, many aspects of processing an exercise cannot be planned in advance. Effective processing involves being tuned in to what is happening in the group at a particular moment, taking responsibility for the safety of group members, and committing yourself to making these exercises meaningful experiences in the life of the group. These are skills that are developed over time.

As you gain confidence and experience, we encourage you to move away from the processing suggestions in this book, and instead to respond to what you see in the moment and to rely on your own understanding of your group's needs. The most effective processing comes when you are open to the lessons contained in the particular experience of the exercise at that moment, which may be different from the experience at any other time.

Making It Work for the Long Term

Even after you have experienced the advantages of working interactively, you may still find it tempting to revert to the old, familiar forms. It is difficult to think consistently about how to involve everyone through interactive techniques; it takes time and energy to plan for every new group and every new meeting in a way that will maximize productive interaction. Furthermore, resistance never goes away completely, and it is far easier in the short term to allow your natural resistance and the group's resistance to prevail.

But if you are convinced of the benefits of the Interactive Meeting Format, and if you are committed to reaping these benefits for your group and for yourself, here are two important practices to incorporate into your work:

Be Consistent

The tendency among people who use some interactive techniques is to use them occasionally, when there is extra time or a special purpose. And even in groups where interaction is the standard operating procedure, when the facilitator or the group is under stress or pressure there is a natural inclination to lower your expectations for the group and yourself and to lapse into a more commonplace, noninteractive format.

But occasional or inconsistent use of interaction sends the message that it is peripheral to the serious work of the group and does not serve an important function. Inconsistent use gives people a sense of justification for their resistance, and it allows resistance to build up. Therefore, each time you choose a static agenda over an interactive one, you make it more difficult to work interactively the next time you wish to.

Consistent use of interaction means that people are always given the opportunity to speak, to move, to interact, and to evaluate. In a group that has a culture of interaction, people recognize that their thoughts and insights are valued. Such an inclusive climate brings great personal rewards to both the group members and the facilitator, and it creates a productive and effective working environment.

Evaluate Your Work

Spend time after each meeting reflecting on what happened. If you are working with a partner, discuss and evaluate together. For example, ask questions such as these about the exercises you selected:

- Did they serve your purpose(s)?

- Were there any unintended results?
- Was there resistance? If so, how did you deal with it?
- Was the risk level appropriate?
- Were the instructions clear?
- Did the processing work to raise points or issues in the way you expected?
- How could the processing have been more effective? Did you overprocess, perhaps draining energy and momentum from the experience? Or did you underprocess, not spending enough time to bring home the points you wanted to raise?
- Do you consider the exercise a success? If so, why? If not, what can you learn from the experience?

Whether an exercise failed or succeeded, you need to understand why. In many cases, an exercise that felt like a complete failure may have been successful in surfacing the dynamics of the group. Evaluate whether or not you were able to stay with the unintended results and continue to work with the group's experience of the exercise.

Look in a similar critical way at the agenda design and the overall meeting facilitation.

Some Final Thoughts about Facilitation

The art of group facilitation has a steep learning curve. In the beginning, there is a lot to learn and there are many areas of questioning and anxiety: *What exercises should I use? How do I give the directions? What happens if the group won't do it? What if the exercises don't work?* But as you continue to work with groups in an interactive way, you will gain strength and confidence and come to better answers and deeper levels of understanding. The process of exploration and growth, however, is endless; learning to deal effectively with human interaction is a lifelong process.

When you set out to acquire the skills to be an effective group facilitator, you are beginning a journey toward overcoming your own fears so that you can experience the power, the joy, and the productivity of working in groups where all involved are engaged and feel valued. There is nothing quite as gratifying as being part of a group that likes to be together, where group members recognize each other's positive qualities, and where each person is encouraged to be creative in developing their ideas and skills.

In taking on the role of facilitator, you are choosing to experiment, to innovate, to open up your heart and mind, and to experience significant personal growth. To continue on this road, you will need the courage that it takes to risk failure in the pursuit of achieving meaningful success. With courage, commitment, and creative energy, you will be able to achieve the effective facilitative leadership that groups of all kinds need to succeed.

Interactive Agenda

Date: _____

Goals:

Materials and Timelines needed:

Introduction Info:

Name Exercise(s) / Warm-up Question:

Processing points:

Springboard Exercise(s):

Processing points:

Work Section (including agendas for small groups):

Summation Info:

Evaluation Exercise: