

Introduction

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Who Is This Book for?

This book is for anyone who runs groups, meetings, or classes, large or small, with participants of any age or demographic makeup. If you facilitate groups (teaching, organizing, leading others toward productive goals), this book is for you—that is, if you want the sessions you run to be lively, creative, interactive, and effective.

What Is a “Group”?

By “group” we mean any gathering of people who come together to achieve a goal.

What Is a “Meeting”?

We use the word “meeting” to describe many different kinds of gatherings. When we say “meeting,” we are referring to all of the following:

- a class, with students from elementary school through adult education.
- a group session of any kind, from a book club to a therapy group to a community organization.
- a staff meeting or other kind of business meeting.
- any gathering of six or more people who have come together for a common purpose.

Some of the advice and instructions in this book will be more or less appropriate for different kinds of meetings, but if you keep an open mind and are willing to experiment, you’ll be amazed at the techniques that will work in unexpected circumstances.

It’s a safe bet that everyone reading these words has been to a meeting that was boring, tedious, and unproductive. Maybe it was even an infuriating waste of your precious time and life’s energy. Maybe you have sat through many meetings like that. This book is dedicated to the proposition that such meetings are against human nature and need not exist upon the earth. We are dedicated to replacing boring, unproductive meetings with meetings that are, at the very least, interesting and productive. But first, let’s visit the bad-meeting world that we all have experienced:

Tap this page if you’ve been to a meeting

- that did not accomplish any of its goals.
- that did not have any discernable goals.
- where you had something to contribute but couldn’t get a word in.
- where you came thinking you were interested in the topic, but left convinced you weren’t.
- where you came not knowing anyone and left not knowing anyone—after two hours in the

- same small room.
- where you learned people’s names only by chance.
- that had no agenda.
- that had an agenda, but the leader didn’t follow it.
- that was hijacked by someone who had their own agenda.
- that was so boring you were fighting to keep your eyes open.
- where you longed for movement, longed for laughter, longed for human connection.

Cover your eyes and groan if you’ve ever led such a meeting. (But please don’t feel guilty. You’re in good company, including the company of the authors.)

Wave your arms in the air if you want to run meetings that are lively and creative, accomplish their goals, and involve all participants. Then put your arms down and keep turning these pages.

Beyond Icebreakers: The Interactive Meeting Format

Most people who pick up this book will do so at first because they want ideas for more “icebreakers.” The book is full of ideas, and you could just skip ahead and find an exercise to do at the next meeting that you run. But to limit your use of the book in that way would be a mistake. We strongly urge you to take the next step as a group facilitator: to have the courage to move beyond icebreakers.

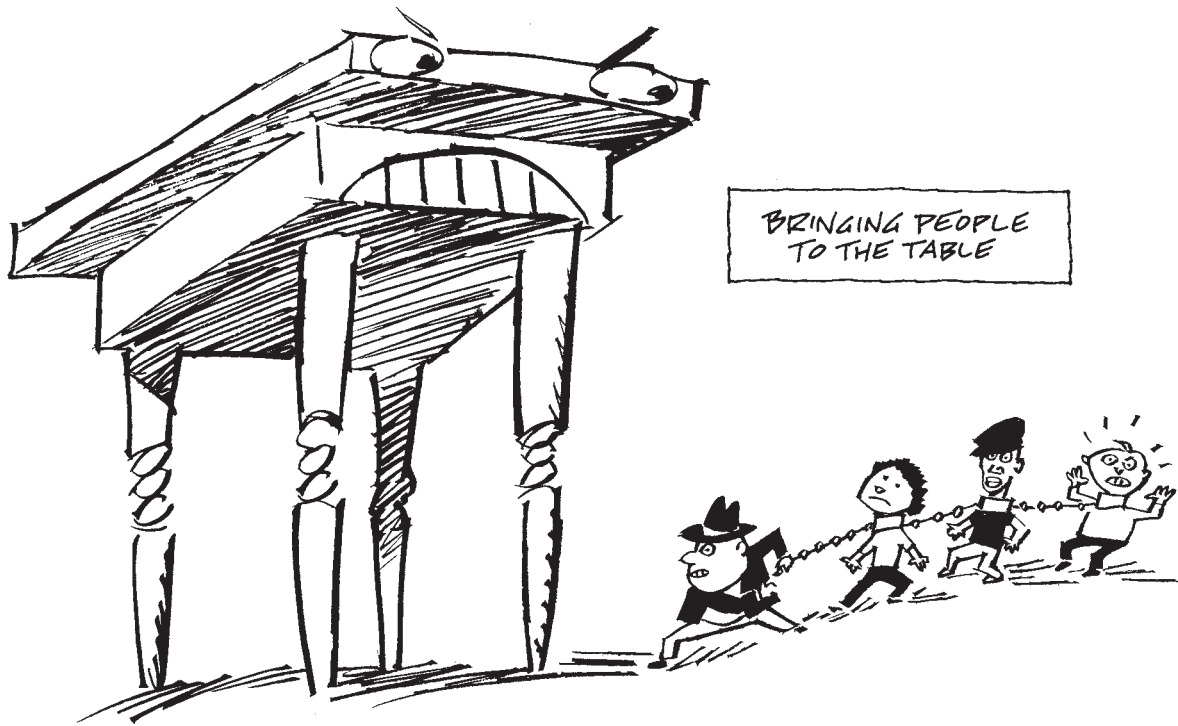
Most of us think of an icebreaker as an exercise that might help people relax and get to know each other at the beginning of a meeting. You will see that in this book we never talk about “icebreakers,” because we believe that icebreakers are only the smallest beginning steps toward running effective meetings. The book describes a methodology that is more than a beginning and has effects far beyond helping people to relax. It is a comprehensive approach that:

- provides an interactive structure from the beginning to the end of a meeting,
- extends throughout the life of a group, and
- has the power to fundamentally transform the way a group functions and heighten the effectiveness of the group’s work together.

This book describes only one aspect of the Teen Empowerment Model, which is a comprehensive methodology for working with groups that has wide-ranging applications in both youth and adult settings. Teen Empowerment plans to publish additional materials explaining how to work with other parts of the model.

For information about Teen Empowerment—the model, our history, our programs, and more—see our website, www.teenempowerment.org.

Moving Beyond Icebreakers talks about “interactive exercises” and the context in which they are most effective—the Interactive Meeting Format, described in chapter 4. This book will show you how to move in your thinking and your action beyond the limits implied by the word “icebreaker” into a greatly expanded understanding of the power of group interaction. This approach to group facilitation will real-



ly “bring everyone to the table” (not drag them there in chains, like these poor folks) so that their ideas and feelings are expressed and heard and the group’s goals will be more readily accomplished. Consistent and thoughtful use of the Interactive Meeting Format will transform your world of meetings.

Does This Work with Adults?

This book outlines an approach to working with groups of all ages for a variety of purposes. While a great deal of our experience has involved working with inner-city teens, we have also used the Interactive Meeting Format extensively with people of all ages. Over a 30-year period, we’ve used the format in countless training sessions with teachers, administrators, police officers, agency board members, and other adults working in various capacities. We’ve used it in classrooms, staff meetings, board meetings, action-oriented groups, therapy groups, recreational groups, and training sessions of all kinds.

We have learned that most of the principles and practices that are effective in engaging teens in important work are also effective with adults. Both youth and adults want to be heard, to feel valued, and to have meaningful input into the decisions that affect their professional and personal lives. Both youth and adults have a need for community and for being connected to the people around them in more than superficial ways. Both youth and adults far too often find themselves at meetings where they feel disconnected, undervalued, isolated, and bored by the monotonous practices that are the norm for most group work situations.

The difference is that while many teenagers in alienating situations will act out their alienation in ways that cannot be ignored, most adults have learned to hide their feelings. Teens may put their heads down on a desk, get a blank look in their eyes, or begin talking with friends in a way that disrupts the group. And if they are required to come to boring or directionless meetings over and over again, some



may decide not to come at all. Adults, on the other hand, will try to maintain their focus and look interested. If the meeting seems to be going nowhere and decisions are not being made, if there is no clear agenda and seemingly no point to the discussion, or if the meeting is driving toward a goal but a few people dominate the discussion while others are silent, most adults will nevertheless pay attention if they can, or maintain the appearance of paying attention if they can't.

However, even though adults have learned to adapt to the bad-meeting world, we have found repeatedly that people welcome the Interactive Meeting Format, which opens up the process to everyone's thoughts and creativity while maintaining structure and focus. We have seen how dramatically levels of productivity are increased through the consistent use of the format. We hope that you will read on, and learn how this new approach to meetings, groups, and classes can help your group or organization develop more productive working relationships, learn important information, and come up with creative ways of overcoming problems.

Some of the exercises in this book are in common use, some were created by Teen Empowerment staff, and some were brought into our practice by TE staff from other sources. We have adapted the exercises to fit a variety of settings, always with a consciousness about how each exercise can further the development of active, cohesive, and productive working groups.

A Note about Pronouns

In order to avoid awkward constructions such as "his or her," which would occur with great frequency in this text, we have chosen to use the third person plural in sentences such as, "Have each person say their name."