

TOOL

Community-Building Activities and Random Grouping Strategies



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Community-Building Activities and Random Grouping Strategies

Purpose

This tool provides a collection of facilitation strategies to build connection, trust, and engagement within a team. It includes both community-building activities and intentional grouping strategies that support inclusive participation and stronger collaboration.

When to Use

Use this tool when launching a new team, when relationships need strengthening, or when energy, trust, or engagement feels low. It is also useful when planning meetings or professional learning sessions that require meaningful interaction and participation.

How to Use It

Select activities that align with your purpose, the group's stage of development, and the time available. Use community-building activities to deepen relationships, surface perspectives, and energize the group. Use random grouping strategies to intentionally mix participants, increase equity of voice, and prevent predictable or habitual pairings. Not every activity will fit every context—choose thoughtfully and adapt as needed. Over time, vary your approach to maintain engagement and respond to the evolving needs of your team.

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COMMUNITY-BUILDING ACTIVITIES

The following activities are those I most often use to energize a team and help a team get to know each other.

Compass points: This activity can be found on the National School Reform Faculty's website (<http://www.nsrffharmony.org/content/compass-points-activity>) and is one of my favorites to do with a group of anywhere between 3 and 300 people. It helps people understand their styles when working in a group and the styles of others and thus cultivates empathy and understanding. It's one of my always-do activities when working with a new team.

Poetry: I love to start or end a learning session or meeting with a poem. I look for poems that have themes related to whatever we're talking about that day and always invite participants to discuss the poem with each other afterward. I prompt them to read aloud passages that resonated with them, to make connections, and to share "what came up for you."

Artifacts: Team members bring an artifact from home that they feel reflects a part of who they are that otherwise would not be seen by colleagues. It could be an object, a photo, an item from their kitchen, or a childhood toy. This kind of show and tell can be really fun and builds understanding and appreciation for each other. Tip: If someone forgets to bring an artifact, I suggest doing a quick sketch of the item.

Pennies: In this activity, a team is given a small pile of pennies (perhaps twice the number of pennies as there are people in the team) and participants are invited to "tell a story from your life—or your family's—about the year on the coin you select." If you're working with a group of young teachers, you'll want to check the years on your pennies to ensure that at least most of them are from the lifetimes of the participants.

Something from your wallet or purse: This is an easy on-the-spot activity because it doesn't require you to provide anything. You simply ask a group of people, "Find something in your purse or wallet that reflects a part of you that we might not know about, and share a story about it." Some examples include photos, key chains, coupons, and membership cards.

M&M game: You need to provide a bag of M&Ms for this game and the following color-coded key: red = something about yesterday; orange: something you do well; yellow = something about your childhood; blue = something you learned last week; brown = something you can't live without; green = something you watch or listen to. Pour an M&M into each person's hand, and take turns responding to the prompt all together or in pairs.

Images: I collect stacks of postcards, calendars and photos that I offer with a range of prompts to stimulate conversation. For example, I share images of forces in nature (e.g., volcanoes, rivers, lightning) and ask people to select the one that most reflects how they feel about change. I also have images of animals, movie posters, and food to prompt conversation. Using images, symbols, and metaphors offers us a way into our thoughts and feelings that sometimes reveals interesting information.

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COMMUNITY-BUILDING ACTIVITIES (Continued)

Symbolic thinking: Inviting people to think through metaphors and symbols is a great way to prompt new insights. For easy and quick check-in prompts you can ask questions such as:

- “If our team were a meal, we would be ...”
- “If I could have a super power it would be”
- “If I were an animal today, I’d be a ...”
- “In my next life I want to be a ...”
- “Today I feel like [what kind of supernatural or mythic being]...”

Storytelling: A simple prompt like, “Tell a story about. . .” is a great way to give people an opportunity to share with each other. These stories can be brief and a precedent to other activities, or they can be extended. For example, let’s say you’re going to analyze first-quarter data reports with a team of teachers. You can give participants 3 minutes each to share with a partner about their experience as children taking tests. This allows people to connect and tell their stories about learning, and it invites them to connect with the emotional experience that children have when taking tests. It can generate empathy and multiple perspectives.

Visual life maps: This activity is good for a team that will work closely together and will benefit from really getting to know each other. Each person creates a life map that shows 8–10 pivotal moments from their life. Images with captions representing those moments can be included to describe the event.

My life as a book: This activity asks people to reflect and tell their stories through writing—but in this case, they are asked to write only the titles of chapters for their life as a book. They can choose the genre of the book and then name the chapters. This can be shared silently and everyone reads each other’s table of contents, or participants can explain what they created.

Tower building: For this activity you need a stack (or several) of index cards. You can do this with one team or break a team into groups—ideally with no more than four people in each group. Tell the group they’ll have a limited amount of time (maybe 8–10 minutes) to silently build a tower with the cards. They can’t use any other supplies, can communicate only nonverbally, and are in competition with each other to see who can build the tallest tower. It’s important to offer reflection prompts. Simple ones work fine: What did you notice about how you worked together? What did you notice about your own participation? What was challenging? You can also do this activity again but remove the competitive aspect, or ask them to build something interesting. This activity allows team members to get different understandings of the roles they play in their team.

Pass the sound: This gets everyone up and being silly. Stand in a circle and pretend to throw an imaginary object to another teammate and make a sound along with it. The person who catches the imaginary object has to imitate the sound you made and then throws it to someone else with a new sound. People can make animal noises or any kind of silly sound.

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COMMUNITY-BUILDING ACTIVITIES (Continued)

Boom whackers: Boom whackers are long, plastic tubes that are tuned to different notes. When you whack them on anything (e.g., the floor, your leg, a table), they make a sound. This is an easy way to make music with a group, especially one whose members might not think they are musical people. Playing with boom whackers is easy and always gets people feeling happy and energized. They can also help a group feel more cohesive since instinctually people try to make their sounds work in rhythm with those of others.

Walk and talk: I incorporate this activity into team meetings or Professional Development agendas if we will be meeting for more than 2 hours together. People need to move, or else their brains get stagnant; I haven't found too many group physical energizers that I like. This could be because standing in a group of people and doing goofy movements is usually outside of my personal comfort zone, but I haven't found too many other people who love those energizer activities either. However, most love the invitation to take a quick 10- or 15-minute walk and talk. I am usually intentional about grouping people in pairs or trios—I don't want them to have to find their own partners all the time, which can be hard—and I usually offer a simple and open-ended prompt to talk about. Sometimes I suggest that they set a timer on their phone so that they'll each have equal time to talk and will arrive back on time.

Two secrets: Everyone writes one secret on a card and gives it to the facilitator. The facilitator reads each card, and the group nominates two or three people they think are the authors of the card. If they are nominated, they stand up. After a few nominations, the facilitator asks the real author of the secret to remain standing (or to stand up) and the others to sit down. You can do this throughout a meeting (or across a series of meetings) by picking a few secrets every time you transition after a break or lunch and for an opening or closing for each day.

Step in, step out: The facilitator chooses key phrases that describe qualities, roles, wishes, or anything else that individuals in the group can relate to. The facilitator reads one phrase (e.g., I am a parent, I teach elementary, I struggle with..., ___ brings me joy), and if the members agree with that statement they step into the middle of a circle. If the statement doesn't represent them, they step out. This activity can also help a group see disagreements among the members without having to make people say anything. You can start with easy, fun, and light statements and move to more controversial ones.

Repeated question: Members form pairs, and the facilitator gives the pairs a question prompt that the members can answer with one word or short phrase answers. Each pair has 3–5 minutes for each person to be the question asker and the answerer. This is used when you want members to become more aware about their beliefs or feelings about a particular topic because they keep answering the same question over and over and end up surprising themselves with the answers that come out after their initial answers. Usually they go deeper into themselves.

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COMMUNITY-BUILDING ACTIVITIES (Continued)

Restorative justice (RJ) community circle: The RJ community-building circle can be used at the beginning of meetings. Everyone sits in a circle, ideally in chairs (not desks), and the process opens with a poem, meditation, or song, which is followed by a check-in question for the group. After everyone who wants to quickly shares in response to the check-in question, the group is asked a bigger question such as, “How are you feeling about the proposed changes for next year?” A talking stick is passed around the circle, and only the person holding it can speak in response to the question. The speaker can talk for as long as they want and is usually encouraged not to respond to what others have said (to prevent the feeling of a discussion). If you’re interested in RJ circles, you can find more information online, perhaps starting here:

<http://rjoyoakland.org/restorative-justice/> .

Check-in whip around: Opening up meetings by simply giving everyone a chance to respond to a prompt is a way to hear from each person and connect. You can generate questions and invite the team to create prompts. Here are some to get you started:

- Share a moment in which you felt good about your work in the week.
- What’s important to you?
- What’s your ultimate concern?
- What do you hold sacred?
- If we could really know you, what would we know?
- If you could really, really know you, what would we know?
- What do you need from someone else to know that you’re being listened to?
- What are we not talking about that we should be?

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RANDOM GROUPING STRATEGIES

To help group members get to know each other, you'll frequently need to create pairs or small groups—you don't always want to leave who they share or work with up to chance or up to who they are sitting next to. Most of the time I create random small groups or pairs (although occasionally I intentionally group people together). Here are the strategies I most often use.

Birthday line-up: In silence, within a defined period of time (usually a few seconds longer than the total number of people in the group) ask people to line up according to their birthday month and day. Designate one corner of the room to be the January starting point and another to be the December ending point. You can't use anything other than nonverbal communication. After the group has formed the line, have them say their birthday month and day aloud to check that it's correct, and then go down the line and group people into twos, threes, or fours. Sometimes I tell people that this is astrological sorting and that they should probably get along with each other. This is fast, fun, and easy to do with groups up to 150 people.

How hot do you like it? This is a fun activity that I learned from author and professional development expert, Marcia Tate. Ask people to line up according to their preference of spiciness: one end of the room represents those who think that ketchup is spicy and the other end represents those who chew on habanero chilies (the hottest chili there is) with no sweat. People can talk to each other while they do this and can create their own categories. After they've lined up, ask a few people to share their spiciness preference and then group them by threes or fours. This activity is also fast and easy with large groups, and people always love talking about food.

How far were you born from this spot? Again, invite participants to line up according to the distance in miles of their birthplace from the place they're standing at that moment. People can talk to each other while they do this—and then you can break them up into whatever number group you want. This invites people to share stories about their place of birth and can be extended so that people can make connections.

Barnyard babble: This activity is from the tribes program. You'll need cards with farm animals on them, which you can make with index cards and stickers. Create sets of animals with the number of people you want in each small group—so four horses if you want a team of four. Randomly pass out cards, tell everyone to look at their card, and then when you say go each person makes the noise of the animal and finds the other people making their same noise. This is loud and fun.

Matching cards: I buy decks of Go Fish cards to create groups of three, four, or six. Simply shuffle the cards and then ask everyone to draw a card and find their group.

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