

# Two Ice Breakers for Difficult Content Training

## Where Would You *Rather Be*?

Let's face it. Your learners, given the choice, would rather be somewhere else! This is particularly true with "required" training programs, issues of policy, or a variety of unpopular topics. Because you know it may be unpopular, use that as a way to open your course, and get at the significance of your session's learning value.

Greet your class and, with a certain amount of "tongue in cheek", suggest that they probably would rather be somewhere else by paraphrasing as follows:

*As important as this session is, I'm sure you'd rather be somewhere else right now. I'd really like to know where you would rather be, and would appreciate if you share with us. If you could be anywhere, where would you like to be rather than here?*

Go around the room in "round robin" fashion and encourage honest, even sometimes amusing answers. One of the purposes is to have the participants learn about each other. Your comments, after they have shared an answer, will sometimes add interesting details. Questions like, "Where is that?", "Do you go there often?", and "Has your family always owned a place there?" will keep the energy in the room and provide interesting insight.

Immediately follow your ice breaker with a question that helps to transition to today's activities. Paraphrase as follows:

*OK. We've all shared where we'd rather be, and there is no shame in that. So, having acknowledged it, let's look at how we can make the best of where we are! I'd like to see what you'd like to walk away with today, and how we can facilitate that happening.*

You've helped them acknowledge that this may not be their most favorite activity but you've helped them focus on the task at hand. Again, go around the room and hear what the learners want to accomplish. Often, you'll be pleasantly surprised at their direct responses that you'll be able to use throughout your facilitation. Thank them for their candor, and even note their thoughts on a whiteboard or electronic tablet. Frame your facilitation around what they'd like to accomplish, and refer to their points as often as possible.

## Write Your Own Ice Breaker

An ice breaker serves a multitude of purposes including encouraging the learners to express themselves within the group. With difficult sessions, traditional ice breakers may have too “light” a tone and can serve as a poor transition to the more serious issues to follow.

One of the things you can do is to create “relevant” questions to which learners can have brief responses. The questions can be purposeful but should at least be non-threatening. This early in your session is not the best place to address concerns or issues. Remember, you’re trying to get the learners to feel comfortable participating, which will be to your advantage later as the issues get more difficult.

Begin by writing a series of questions on 3 x 5 cards or paper. The questions should be thought provoking, but not specifically related to the issues of the session. Your questions should relate to your audience’s job or institution, but not the issue. Write questions like:

- “I do my best thinking when I...”
- “Working in a retail branch is like...”
- “The song that best describes my job is...”
- “The most positive experience I have ever had at work is...”
- “The subject taught in school that best relates to what I do now is...”

You can make the questions specific to your institution, but make them so that virtually any learner can respond. “Deal the cards” out to learners and tell them to be prepared to read the question, and provide a response. Begin asking the group to respond in “round robin” fashion and keep the energy level up and encourage good natured and even humorous answers, if appropriate. One variation of the ice breaker is to select just one of the questions and have the group respond to the same question individually.

Summarize some of the learner feedback. Single out a few that were amusing or thought provoking. Suggest that during the session you’d appreciate the similar candor and expressiveness as the issues become more difficult. Remind them of their responses during the session as if to say, “you were able to share with us your positive experiences, now I need you to discuss more negative ones” or similar statements.