Group-Building Exercises

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BONDING & TRUST-BUILDING

Milling 8-100+ people 10-25 minutes
One person directs people into pairs. In each pair, whoever feels moved to speak first talks, and the other person simply listens and says "Thank you." No dialogue! Then the pair moves apart and each person finds a new partner.
In the pairings, the content of what is spoken is whatever the leader directs. The form is usually a short sentence completion. The direction may be to share about oneself (e.g. "Something i'm feeling right now is . . ." or "Something i feel thankful for is . . .") or about the other person (e.g. "Something i notice about you right now is . . ." or "Something i appreciate about you is . . .").

Big Wind Blows (aka "All My Neighbors") 12-60 people 10-25 minutes
This can be run as a form of musical chairs (in which case the caller changes each time) or by simply moving in or out of a circle. (The latter form is especially useful in groups where one or more members have mobility issues.) The caller says, "The big wind blows for . . ." and everyone who fits that condition must move to a new seat (or in the second version, step into the circle). Whoever doesn't get a seat becomes the next caller. In the musical chairs version, the condition must be something that the caller is included in; for example, the caller can only say, "The big wind blows for everyone with a younger sibling," if the caller has a younger sibling themselves. The great thing about this game is that it can be used with varying levels of depth, from "The big wind blows for everyone wearing blue," to "The big wind blows for everyone who is bisexual," to however deep the group is ready to go.

Mix It Up and Guess 5-20 people 10-30 minutes
Everyone writes down their answer to the same question about themselves; the slips of paper get passed to the center, mixed up and redistributed, and then whoever receives each slip tries to guess (can be with group help if that makes it more fun) who wrote that answer. If you get your own paper back, you can call for a re-mix before the guessing starts. Some fun items to use in this form are guessing people's middle names, telling one surprising or unique fact about oneself, or guessing favorite books.

Scavenger Hunt 15-100+ people 20-60 minutes
The length of this game varies depending on how many people are present and how many items there are on the list, plus the difficulty of the items. Requires advance preparation of drawing up the list on handouts to be distributed. The goal is for participants to find at least one person in the room (or the community) who fits each criterion on the list; they then write that person's name next to that item. Here are some ideas for list items: someone who has been to Australia; someone who speaks at least 2 languages besides English; someone who has more than 3 siblings; someone whose parents still live in the house where that person grew up; someone who has a pet besides a cat or dog; possibilities abound! In addition to being fun, this can help people get to know each other.

Who's at the Table 8-100+ people 15-30 minutes
Split into groups of 3-5 people (pick a number depending on how many people are present and how much time you have—smaller groups for less time). The goal is for each group to find one thing they have in common, and one thing they are all different on. Then if you have time, the groups can take turns announcing to the whole assembly what they discovered. Or act it out for others to guess!

Blindfold Walk
Split participants into pairs, and ask one member of each pair to put on a blindfold. Then have the sighted person lead the the blind person on a walk. This simple exercise can also be used to lead into a facilitated conversation about trust and communication.

Life Raft
Place a sheet of paper on the floor, that is the raft. Everyone "swims" around the raft until the leader shouts "SHARK!" and everyone has to get onto the raft before you have counted to five. After each "shark attack" half of the sheet of paper is removed. The group has to find ways of surviving as a group. (You can get up to 15 people on a piece of letter size paper.)

Wallets
Have everyone take out their wallets and spread the contents out on the table in front of them. Offers amazing insights into parts of self usually kept hidden and the commonality of the human experience.

If This Person Was a . . .
This game relies on people in the group knowing each other. Someone volunteers to think of a person in the group, and to answer questions about them. The rest of the group is trying to guess who has been selected. The questions take forms using nouns such as,
"If this person were a house, what kind of house would they be?" or "If this person were a pair of shoes, what kind of shoes would they be?" And so on. Once the person is guessed, a new volunteer selects a new person.

Magic Carpet
Take a towel or something that is barely large enough for the whole group to stand on together. The task is then to turn the towel over, without anyone stepping off of it.

Middle Name Guessing Game
Have everyone write their middle name on a piece of paper and fold it up and put it in a basket. Then people pull the slips of paper out of the basket, and try to guess whose middle name that is.

Growing Up Pictures
Ask everyone to draw a picture of themselves growing up. Then ask: "Do you think that the other people in the room drew pictures that look like yours?" They'll say no. Then have them shout out things they think are the same about the pictures (flip chart). Then have them shout out things they think are different. Then ask, "What do you notice when you compare these two lists?"

Walk Together, Walk Apart
Two people demo first, standing back-to-back in front of the group. They start to walk away from each other, and the rest of the group calls out things they think are different between the two people. When they are far apart, ask the group to call out things that are the same about them, and each time the pair takes a step closer together, until they are back near each other again. Discussion follows on similarities and how they naturally bring us together, differences separate, and so on.

MOVING AROUND

Person-to-Person 10-60 people 10-20 minutes
Requires an odd number of participants. One person starts out as caller, while everyone else pairs up. Caller says, for example, "Elbow to elbow," and all the pairs stand with their elbows touching. Then caller says another body part, e.g. "Back to back," and the pairs stop touching elbows and change to backs. After a few times of this the caller says "Person to person," and everyone switches partners. Whoever doesn't have a partner becomes the next caller.

Stretch & Point
First person does a stretch, while the rest of the group follows. Then they point to someone else, and that person leads the group in a different stretch, and so on.

Touch Blue
Have everyone touch something blue. As soon as they touch whatever's been named, call out something else instead, such "touch yellow" or "touch wood" or "touch bumpy." Variations available, e.g. "touch blue on someone else."

Look Up, Look Down
In a circle, people look at ground, then up at one other person--if meet gaze, then both out. Continue to pull in as circle gets smaller.

Switching Places
Group standing in a circle, with one person in the middle. Two people across the circle who nod at each other have agreed to switch places. The person in the middle tries to get a place when it comes empty.

Moving to a Stop
The group is to start moving briskly about the room. They can go anywhere. The objective is to gradually slow down and come to a complete stop and freeze at exactly the same moment. The only restrictions are that there is to be complete silence and no signals used--just be aware of what is going on around you. This exercise is simple and feels good when it works (and usually does). (Again, the key is for nobody to try and control the group. If it doesn't work, point this out and try again.)

Pulse
The group stands or sits in a circle, and holds hands. The objective of the exercise is for the group to send a hand squeeze or "Pulse" around the ring of hands in a continuous loop. Once the initial pulse is going further pulses can be added.

THEATER IMPROV

3-Person Machines 12-45 people 20-45 minutes
Form groups of 3. Each group designs and acts out a machine, such as a sewing machine, washing machine, pencil sharpener, etc., for the whole group to guess. (Note, i've wondered whether this might also work using living organisms instead of machines?)

What Are You Doing?
In a circle, standing. A starts a simple mime (e.g. ironing). The quality of the mime is unimportant. B asks "What are you doing?" A replies with something completely different from what co is miming (e.g. "fishing"). B then has to mime this (fishing). C then asks "What are you doing?" and so on. Objectives are speed, no repetition, and always unconnected ideas.

The Gift/Magic Glob
Group stands in a circle. The first person takes out of their pocket an imaginary glob, shapes it into something, and passes it to next person, saying aloud what it is. For example, "Louis, look what i found for you, it's a . . . dead battery!" Louis as the recipient gives a hearty thank you, then shapes the glob into a new gift for the next person. Part of the point of this game is learning to work with whatever you're handed.

VERBAL GAMES

One-Word Story Building 4-60 people 10-25 minutes
Sit or stand in a circle. Each person says one word (or 3) out loud, adding to the previous words to form sentences. The sentences tell a short story. Or, you can have each person add a sentence.

E-poo-you-cat
Give everyone a full sheet of paper and a pen/pencil. Have everyone fold their pieces of paper horizontally (like an accordion fold) into 8 sections, alternating between small & large sections. Then give everyone a minute to write a phrase on the top section of the paper. Then the papers are passed to the left. The next step is for whoever is now holding the paper to draw a picture representing the phrase they are reading. Then they fold over the sheet so that the next person can't see the original words, and can only see the picture. That person then gives new words for that picture, then folds and passes to the left. And so on, until the papers are filled up. Then you unravel the whole sheets and see what the chain was, often very funny.

E-Prime
Carry on on whatever conversation seems to happen, but do it with no "to be" verbs: is, was, be, am, are, were. (Invented by General Semantics founder Alfred Korzybski, E-prime has a small but passionate following.) Certain phenomena tend to arise in our initial attempts to use E-prime, including: (1) heightened consciousness of our words--before and AS we say them; (2) a lot of humorous, frustrating, instructive communication block; (3) finding ourselves forced into our own experience of life, into the real connections between things and into more detailed articulations. All because we can no longer make oversimplified abstract God-like declarations (like "such and such IS this or that"). For example: Since I can't say "This is a great day!" I have to come up with "I like this day" or "I found myself really engaging in life today" or "This weather makes me feel really good."

TEACHING

Secret Agent (or Solar Eclipse) 12-50 people 10-15 minutes
Leader explains directions. Tell each person to select, in their minds, one person who is out to get them (their personal enemy), but not to let on who it is. Then tell each person to select one person who is their bodyguard, their personal ally, and again not to say who it is. Then tell everyone to walk around while doing their best to keep their ally between them and their enemy at all times. The chaotic patterns that result usually lead to lots of fun.

Systems Game 12-50 people 10-15 minutes
Leader explains directions. Tell each person to select, in their minds, two other people in the circle. Then direct them to stay equidistant from both people. Debrief ask: "What did you experience?"

Doubles 8-50 people 10-20 minutes
1. The player who chooses to start the game says a word or compound made up of two words, such as "attorney general" or "out/law" or even "con/tact."

2. The next person to speak takes the second word of the first player's double and uses it as the first word of a new double: "general hospital" or "law firm" or "tact/less."

3. Players choose for themselves when to take a turn. Players can take as many turns during the course of the game as feels comfortable.

4. The chain of doubles continues until everyone who wants to play has had a turn.

5. If for ANY reason you don't accept someone's double, simply say "No." Any player may do this at any time to the most recent double. When this happens, the player who gave the word that got declined must come up with a replacement double, or else say "No" to the person who gave the previous double. If necessary, go clear back to the beginning of the chain.
6. Try to play quickly; if the group seems stuck, players should not hesitate to say "No."

LAUGHTER

Ha 8-20 people 10-25 minutes
Stand in a circle. First person says "Ha." Second person says "Ha-ha." Third person says "Ha-ha-ha." You get the idea. See how many you can get before folks break out into laughter. You can either go all the way up as many as there are people, or start the count over when people laugh.

Pass the Orange 7-30 people 10-25 minutes
Bring one orange, and stand in a circle. The goal is to pass the orange around the circle without using any hands, by putting it under one's chin and passing it to the next person that way.

Lion Tamer
Group in a circle, with 3 initial "lion tamers" in the middle. The lion tamers try to get others in the outer circle to laugh. Outer circle people can't look away. They can smile, but if they laugh then they join the lion tamers in the middle. Keep going until time is up or until all the lions have been tamed.

Honey I Love You, But You Just Can't Make Me Laugh
One person goes into the center of the circle. They walk up to someone on the outside, and that person then has to say, "Honey, i love you, but you just can't make me laugh"--without smiling or laughing. If they succeed, then the person in the center goes on to another attempt with someone else. If the person on the outside smiles or laughs, then they become the person in the center.

PARTY GAMES

Celebrity

Each person takes 10 different little pieces of paper, and on each one, writes down the name of a person/character that at least a few people in the room could reasonably be expected to know. It could be an actual real person, living or dead (e.g. Mother Jones, Monica Lewinsky, Harriet Tubman) or a fictional human or non-human character from books or TV (e.g. Jo March of Little Women, or Rosie the Riveter). Some groups even do a version where you can't write anyone who is American.

Everyone folds up their little pieces of paper with names on them, and puts them in a hat or bowl. You need a watch with a second hand and someone who will be the timekeeper (or you can take turns being the timekeeper).

You take turns going around the circle. Each person's turn is one minute long. The person whose turn it is reaches into the hat and chooses one piece of paper with a name. They then have to describe that person, e.g. "this person led hundreds of people out of slavery, there's a song about her, she grew up a slave in the south but later escaped to New York," etc. until someone guesses the person's name. Then the person chooses another name and does the same, until the minute is over. Once the name is guessed, that piece of paper is put aside so it doesn't get mixed back in the hat with the other names.

The timekeeper calls out "time" at one minute, and if no one has guessed the name currently being described, it goes back into the hat for another person to draw later.

If a person draws a name and they have no idea who it is, there are several options (e.g. Paul Martin, who is the current prime minister of Canada). One is that they just put any names back into the hat that they don't know and choose a different name. Another option is that they have to get people to guess the name based on other info (e.g. "this is a man, the last name is the same as a famous type of guitar, the first name is the same as a very conservative, restrictive guy in the Bible who laid down lots of rules for women," etc.). You can also give people one chance to put an unknown name back in, but the 2nd name they get they don't know they need to do that method above.

And so you go around the circle, each person getting a minute of time. Usually with 10 names written by each person, you end up going around a couple of times at least till you run out of names.

Psychiatrist

This game relies on having one or two people present who don't know how it works and are trying to figure it out (such person(s) go out of the room while the rules are explained to the rest of the group). Everyone sits in a circle. When the seeker returns to the room, they are instructed to ask personal questions to specific individuals in the circle, and from the answers to try to figure out what is going on. Each person in the circle answers *as if they were the person sitting to the left,* instead of answering as themselves. If they get an answer wrong (as they often will, because most of us even in community have lots of information we don't know about our friends & neighbors), the person on their left shouts out, "Psychiatrist!" and everyone in the circle makes an excited noise and in a flurry of activity, changes seats. The questions the seeker asks can be wide open, such as, "What kind of work do you do?", "Have you ever been to Tijuana?", What's your favorite food?" Obviously the person answering tries not to look sideways or in any way let on that they are answering as someone next to them.

In the Manner of the Adverb

One person goes out of the room. The others gathered choose an adverb to act out. Then when the absent person returns, that person gets to ask others to perform acts "in the manner of the adverb." For example, they might say, "Everyone please stand up in the manner of the adverb," so then if the adverb were "slowly," everyone would slowly stand up. Or they might say, "Paula, please tie Jason's shoelaces in the manner of the adverb," and so on. They keep on doing this until they successfully guess the adverb. Then someone else can go out of the room for the group to choose a new adverb.