Icebreaking Introductions
September 2008

A member of our Geneva Facilitator Network asked if I knew any "non-cheesy" introductions for facilitating meetings. He is the director of a centre for Humanitarian Dialogue and often is involved in high level meetings and negotiations with conflicting factions from all corners of the world. Facing each other across a conference table where often the lives and well being of thousands of people are at risk demands more dignified consideration than most facilitators have to deal with. I understood his dilemma. I too work in the humanitarian world; my clients include WHO, UNAIDS, IOM; the topics of our meetings can frequently be 'heavy', so 'non-cheesy' is definitely a requirement.

I replied in a typical facilitative way and said, "That's a great topic for one of our informal meetings. Why don't you volunteer to run a session?" Bravely, he took on the challenge and with an associate he designed a one hour session for the 20 people who attended our next meeting. After a brief introduction where we considered the difference between a simple introduction and an icebreaking introduction, they suggested a matrix: big/small; formal/informal, then through a reflective process the group populated the matrix with what they considered appropriate examples.

The activity proved somewhat challenging for many of us who were somewhat stumped by the limitations of the matrix, and a lively discussion ensued about the need to consider much broader categories for determining an appropriate choice. The discussion revolved around purpose of the meeting, level of familiarity, the topic or theme, the level and status of the participants (very relevant for those of us who work in Geneva in the UN agencies and international organisations) current atmosphere and the desired atmosphere.

My frustration with the limitations of the matrix and our earlier rich discussion continued to monopolize my thoughts after I returned home, and I struggled into the early morning to capture my decision making processes and attempted to more systematically codify the numerous criteria I consider when matching icebreaker/introductions with the requisite meetings.

The following 'model' is an attempt to codify the considerations that part of the decision making process I have evolved over the years.

Considerations

Perhaps the major criterion is the 'purpose' of the meeting. In general I think it's safe to say that in any icebreaking introduction we are attempting to limit resistances and to increase collaboration. Several criteria shape my first thoughts. The information on which I base my decision is collected from interviews with my sponsor or client and where possible the participants

themselves using a template: The 9P's of Preparation which includes: Purpose, Problem, People, Product, Parameters, Process, Place, Protocol, Pre-reading.

Based on the input from informants I can get a picture of the anticipated 'state' of the group and the state I would like to create in order for the meeting to tackle its issues. My guiding principle is how much 'Nemawashi' I need to do.

'Nemawashi' is a Japanese term which broadly means "to prepare the ground for planting". I need to know how 'fertile' or ready the group is to address the topic. This is not at all in the sense of pre judging or stereotyping individuals, but I do need to know how much time it is likely to take to establish a condusive atmosphere and how much emotional energy needs to be addressed before we can productively tackle substantive issues.

Motivation of the Group

I like to understand the motivation of the group towards solving the issue at hand. To help me in this I consider do we need 'Away from motivation' or 'Towards motivation'

Away from motivation is about getting agreement about an undesirable situation that the group individually and collectively wants to avoid or resolve.

Towards motivation is about getting agreement about a common and desirable future situation.

Away from Motivation	Towards Motivation
Establish a common sense of the problem or issues	Establish a common sense of solution or desired future state.
Raise awareness of personal or organisational weaknesses or development needs	Raise awareness of potential of future improved personal or organisational performance.
Recognise the different array of perspectives on the issue	Recognise the rich diversity of potential ideas for solution

Size

In my experience, the smaller the group the more flexible and open the activity can be; the larger the group the more planned and organised you need to be. You can't say to a group of 40 or 160 people, "Get into groups of 10 making sure that each department is represented in each group and that you also consider gender and cultural diversity.

Small (Up to 15 or 20)	Moderate (20-40)	Large (40 -160)
Can have members establish a group charter	Can have sub groups /tables establish a group charter – (motto symbol)	
Loose organisation determined by the group and allowing each individual to volunteer inputs	Loose instructions for the group- very clear time bound guidelines for input in plenary	Greater planning and organisation. Pre determine groups, inform participants prior or on arrival – lists, name tags, name tents on tables etc. Clear written instructions for group discussions
Individual inputs to whole group	Group introductions – limited input to the whole group	Individual inputs to the group. Can repeat the exercise by changing the groups at a later time.
Facilitator capture the key comments and ideas on flip charts	Can have the group record key comments on separate flip charts	Depending on the length of the meeting can invest time on displaying key ideas or comments e.g. on cards on a wall

In small groups the interaction can be individual and involve the whole group. My goal is always to do this openly, occasionally if the level of distrust so high among participants I might allow people to begin contributions anonymously. If the facilitator can establish a safe environment, participants will soon be willing to be more transparent and honest with their contributions.

Tone

The tone of the meeting derives from the individual relationships of the members and their personal opinion of the topic. It can be a complex mix of personal rapport – or lack of it and peoples' attitude to the topic.

Topic

Positive

People	
Good relationships among the members and common agreement about their dislike of the topic or proposal

Collaborative process getting agreement on key issues exposing any prejudice or presuppositions | Good relationship among the members

Positively disposition towards the topic or need for a solution

Minimal time on state, can focus on substantive issues |
| High levels of mistrust among members and resistance for topic

Focus on improving rapport among group
create transparency about members' positions on the topic | Poor relationships between members: distrust, dislike, unfamiliarity
Positive disposition towards the topic whether resolving a problem of finding new ideas.

Build rapport and relationships to prevent lack of innovation: Abilene paradox or status quo solutions |

Negative   Positive