How to Build an Inclusive Team Environment with Questions and Activities

A tool for managers and team leaders

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Advisory Board

GOAL

Build an inclusive team environment using questions and activities that facilitate safe and meaningful interactions and relationship-building.

INTENDED USERS

People managers, team leaders

TIME REQUIRED

10 minutes to review

HOW TO USE THIS TOOL

A safe and inclusive culture ensures team members feel a sense of belonging. To build this culture, team members need opportunities to meaningfully interact with one another. While some of these opportunities may come naturally, people managers and team leaders must also lead in facilitating opportunities for connection. icebreaker questions and activities are excellent ways for team members to get to know one another. However, some questions or activities may be inadvertently exclusive. This tool provides a guide on how to avoid exclusive questions, how to ask questions in an effective way, and activities to continue encouraging conversations.

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Part 1: Learn how to ask inclusive questions

Despite the best intentions, some icebreaker questions can create environments where team members feel unsafe or unwelcome.

To steer clear of exclusive icebreakers:

1. Avoid questions that assume all team members have the same personal experiences or backgrounds. For example, a question like, "What's your favorite country you've traveled to?" assumes all team members have the resources to travel internationally.

2. Refrain from asking questions that are overly personal. Questions should allow team members to choose the level of personal information they share. For example, a question like "If you could be any kitchen utensil, what would you be?" gives team members the flexibility to share personal details or keep their answers light.

Most questions can be reframed to be more inclusive. See page 4 for examples of commonly asked exclusive questions and how to reframe them. See page 5 for a picklist of inclusive icebreaker questions.

Commonly asked exclusive question	What it assumes	How to reframe it
What's your favorite childhood memory?	This question assumes that every team member feels comfortable and able to share a joyful childhood memory. Team members who experienced childhood trauma may be unable to recall a happy childhood memory.	*What is a memory that sparks joy for you?* Broaden the question to allow team members to choose a memory from any time in their life. This question also allows answerers to respond with a memory from their professional life if they do not want to share something personal.
What is your favorite Christmas tradition?	This question centers around those who celebrate Christmas. It assumes that all team members celebrate the same holiday.	*What is your favorite holiday tradition?* Asking about holiday traditions in general, instead of a specific holiday, gives team members flexibility. Keep in mind that asking about holiday traditions only in December may make it seem like you are only thinking about Christmas. Be sure to ask about favorite traditions at other times of the year as well.
If you could be a character from [insert specific TV show], who would you be?	This question can exclude team members of different ages, team members who do not share the same pop culture knowledge as the person asking the question, team members who have not seen the TV show, or team members who do not have time or access to watch TV.	*If you could be a character from any TV show, movie, or book, who would you be?* This question will engage your entire team instead of only team members with the shared experiencing of seeing the same TV show.

Picklist of inclusive icebreaker questions:

- What is a food that is meaningful to you?

- What's a holiday or date that holds significance to you?

- Who are some of the important people in your life?

- What's one of your favorite ways to spend time with loved ones?

- What is something you're proud of?

- What is something you're grateful for?

- How would you describe a great day of your life?

- If your life was a song, what would it be?

- If you were a kitchen utensil, what would you be?

- If you could have anyone play you in a movie about you, who would you choose?

Part 2: Embed icebreakers into team norms

Once you've learned how to craft inclusive icebreaker questions, embed them regularly into your team operations. Follow these three tips to make icebreakers a regular and effective component of team interactions:

1. If the team is new to being asked icebreaker questions, share the purpose of the exercise with the team. Make sure team members know the intention is to create a safe environment where they can connect with each other.

2. Incorporate icebreaker questions and activities at a regular cadence. Consider opening standing meetings (such as weekly team meetings) with a short icebreaker so that team members can continue learning about each other.

3. Consider rotating the responsibility of asking icebreaker questions to other team members to give everyone a chance to ask a question. Before sharing this responsibility, ensure team members understand how to ask inclusive questions.

Part 3: How to continue the conversation

In addition to regularly posing short questions, consider occasionally facilitating longer activities that encourage vulnerability, candor, and meaningful interaction.

Unlike asking icebreaker questions, these activities all require team members to share personal details, with the purpose of building deeper connections. Before facilitating these activities, create a safe environment by:

- **Preparing team members in advance and making the activities optional:** Be transparent about what the activity will be so that team members can choose if they want to participate.

- **Providing an option to share anonymously (when possible):** For example, the roses and thorns activity detailed below could be done with anonymous participation by asking team members to share their roses and thorns with you ahead of the meeting using non-identifying language and then you can share their answers out. For virtual meetings, you can use anonymous options like virtual whiteboards

See the table on the next page for five team-building activities.

Team-building activity	How it works	Purpose
Roses and thorns	• At beginning of a meeting, ask everyone to share a rose and a thorn from their work. • A rose is a highlight, success, or something positive that happened. • A thorn is a challenge experienced or something that could use support.	Embrace vulnerability by being open about both the positive and difficult aspects of work.
Tell your story redux	• In pairs, have each person spend two minutes recounting a important story from their life. • Then, prompt each person to retell their story in a way different than they would normally tell it.	Encourage authentic narratives by giving people the opportunity to share the "un-polished" parts of their life.
Empathy cards	• Have all participants anonymously write on cards one thing that worries them about work. For example, participants may write about drawing boundaries or balancing competing priorities. • Collect and shuffle the cards. Redistribute them so everyone receives someone else's card. • Ask team members about what they learned from reading the cards. What themes did you notice? Did anything surprise you? Did anything resonate with you?	Empathize with similar struggles by finding shared connection points in the cards.
Shared moments	• Have your team members think of two to four important moments in their life. • Ask everyone to mark down the moments in their life onto a shared white board.	Appreciate diversity of experience by seeing the moments that matter to other teammates.
Inside scoop	• Have participants choose a picture they want to share that shows something about themselves outside of work. • This can either be done in a rotation, or all at once	Share our whole selves by bringing a photo from outside of work.

Source: "3 Icebreakers To Build Empathy Among Strangers Within 10 Minutes." Fast Company, April 18, 2018. https://www.fastcompany.com/40557322/3-icebreakers-to-build-empathy-among-strangers-within-10-minutes.

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