



# Civic Reinventions, Inc.

*Reinventing Futures Through Strategic Conversation*

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## THE ART OF BREAKING ICE

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Great icebreakers launch a great meeting. They dissolve barriers among strangers. Bad icebreakers freeze the ice harder and freak out introverts by demanding intimate details from complete strangers. At its best, a good ice breaker is a proven facilitator's strategy to make the beginning of meetings thrive.

A zillion icebreakers exist on the Internet. Written for every occasion from the first date to waiting in the line at the airport to the annual corporate retreat, they can be ridiculous and invasive:

"What fruit do you want to be when you grow up?"  
"What?!"

"If you were a keyboard, what type would you be?"  
"Really!?"

"What insect best resembles your personality?"  
"I have no idea, but I'd like to squish the damn bug."

Cutesy icebreakers cruelly put the shy on the spot. Icebreakers that turn an extrovert into a fountain of excess may turn off the introvert's spigot.

*Leader:* "If you were Godzilla, what would you say to your mother?"

*Extrovert:* "Wow! What a great question! Mom! Blah! Blah! Blah! That was fun! "

*Introvert thinking silently:* "Are you kidding me? I'm out of here."

By definition, icebreakers crack the ice. People relax. The room warms up with the buzz of conversation. A good icebreaker cuts a passageway for the whole group to leave port confident, energized, and focused on the agenda at hand.

Icebreakers work best if they connect to the topic being addressed in the meeting. A discussion about the type of fruit you are really only works at a meeting of produce sellers. Icebreakers serve a dual purpose: They put people at ease and focus the mind on the topic at hand. Here are some examples:

If your meeting is about affordable housing, ask something like, "What was the shabbiest place you ever lived and why?"

If your summit focuses on transportation ask, "What was the most unusual trip you ever took?"

If it is about environmental justice and climate change ask, "If you were a cheetah, where would you run and hide?"

You will be amazed when you overhear conversations in well-designed icebreakers. Folks will pause, laugh, and go deep easily as they engage the topic at hand.

Icebreakers don't need to be silly. They can be poignant, even tender. For example, at a meeting of biking and neighborhood advocates I facilitated in Pasadena, California, I asked, "When did you first discover you could be unsafe on a bike?" People shared stories of their first fall or accident as children learning to ride. Some mentioned close brushes with clueless drivers who nearly killed them. One talked about slipping on gravel when he was six and telling his parents, "I've had a hard life. My cat ran away. My rabbit died. I fell off my bike." Another refused to answer, saying it was private. However, even in her silence, the exercise helped her and others realize the powerful emotions present that evening.

Once you have written the questions, running an icebreaker is simple. Get the group's attention using a firm voice, clinking a glass or, my favorite, ringing a chime. As a professional facilitator, I always carry a chime in my bag of tricks. Once the room quiets,

give the instruction and set the group loose. Here's one final example. This was for a conference on transportation for seniors and persons with disabilities.

"Welcome. Thanks for being here." [I announced the name of the event and its purpose.] "It's icebreaker time. Pick one person and turn to that person now. Ask him or her, 'What was it like getting to this meeting?' Take one minute to answer the question, then switch. You may begin."

There was an immediate avalanche of animated talk. Participants finished the exercise smiling and eager to hear what was next.

Icebreakers that are on-topic can be fun, expand perspectives, and maybe even touch the heart. Your icebreaker will help the group thaw and engage the event's topic. In less than five minutes, your group can be off to a great start.

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