

Guide to Check-ins, Openers, and Icebreakers

Create opportunities for increased participation and engagement early in your meeting by using the right opener. Match your opener choice to the meeting purpose, participant size, and length.

Use the chart below to clarify your intentions and explore various options that fit your meeting purpose.



How familiar is the group with each other?
How important is building the group?

| Low | Increasing or Medium | High |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p><u>Single Session:</u></p> <p>Group meets once or twice; is not doing ongoing work together</p> <p>Question type: less personal, less vulnerability required</p> | <p><u>Short Term:</u></p> <p>Group works together for a fixed time and/or purpose</p> <p>Question type: focus on blend of relationship and task, to work well together while fulfilling the purpose</p> | <p><u>Ongoing/Longer Term:</u></p> <p>Group works together/as a team overtime</p> <p>Question type: can include questions that call for more vulnerability and candor, especially as trust increases</p> |

What are your goals? Do you want to connect participants to:

| | | |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p><u>Purpose:</u></p> <p>Solicit information and ideas to sharpen and contribute to the meeting goals</p> | <p><u>Other People:</u></p> <p>Pay attention to the human element to increase participation, candor, and trust</p> | <p><u>Both:</u></p> <p>Combine question types to get the best of both worlds!</p> |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|



How long is the meeting?

| | |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p><u>Short:</u> 30 –60 minutes meetings; approx. 5-10 mins check in</p> <p>Use fewer, shorter, and easier questions</p> | <p><u>Longer:</u> half day or all-day meetings; approx. 15-30 minutes check in</p> <p>You can use questions that build on past and that require deeper thought and more expansive thinking</p> |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|



What is the group size?

| | |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p><u>Small:</u> (10-12 or less)</p> <p>Everyone answers/ participates individually</p> | <p><u>Medium to Large:</u> (11-13 or More)</p> <p>If connection is most important, have everyone speak. For example: Use small group (trio/pair/table) discussions and tasks with high level report out to hear from a few people</p> <p>If participation is most important: use a poll, technology (like <i>Jamboard [only available until Oct 2024]</i>, <i>Padlet</i>, <i>Mentimeter</i>), or game to gather and share information. These inputs can be the basis of a quick reflection.</p> |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|



What's in a Question?

Opening questions can cover a wide range of subjects that may be related to work, a person's interests and experiences, or to stretching the group's imagination and creativity.

Sample Questions and Techniques

Connect Participants to Purpose

- **What do you hope** to get out of or contribute to today's meeting? Why did you come today?
- **What is most important** to address today?
- **What have you learned** about X topic lately?
- **What might hinder or help** us to accomplish our goal?
- **Conduct a quick poll:** How clear is the (fill in blank – outcome, project plan, etc.)? How confident are you about (fill in blank)?

Connect Participants to People

- **Use techniques** to clarify who is here: Raise your hand if you ... (are from a certain place, are in a certain role, etc.)
- **Use questions** to elicit HOW people are doing: How are you in this moment? Share a current challenge and/or a recent accomplishment.
- **Use a check in question** to help you understand experiences and interests: What is your favorite (fill in blank)?
- **Use ice-breakers** or short games and trivia questions to create connection and fun.



Connect Participants to Purpose and People

- **Talk at your table.** Introduce yourself. When did you first learn about or start working on (topic)? What do you want to get out of today's meeting?
- **What is the most interesting example** of X that you've seen?
- **Bigger group icebreaker:** Play a few rounds of "This or That" questions: Share a few pairs of opposite or different items. End with a question related to the work topic. Participants vote with their fingers.

When time is shorter

- **Ask people to answer a couple of polling questions** by raising their hands or using the group chat/online polling tool (such as *Mentimeter*).
- **Ask a question that requires a short answer, word or phrase.**
- **Ask everyone to answer a question** using a sticky on a virtual tool like *Padlet* (online or in-person) or a flip chart (in-person). Then, ask participants to reflect on what they see – what’s an idea or example on the *Padlet* that is interesting to you?
- **Use tools and smaller groups** to create space for interaction. For example:
 - Ask people to speak in pairs or trios for 6 minutes (works for online and in-person). Then, in the full group, ask a handful of people to share.
 - Use *Padlet*’s tools: sticky notes, map or timeline. People can put themselves or a project on a map or timeline and share links, pictures, and comments.



When you have more time

- **Make a flip chart picture** in a small group depicting an aspect of your work, team or partnership (relate it to the meeting focus).
- **1-2-4-All technique** from *Liberating Structures** (12 – 18 minutes)
- **Carousel: Identify 3-4 people to share** their experience or describe a project. Participants choose a group to join. The presenter shares for 5 minutes, participants ask questions for 10 minutes, then participants switch rooms/rotate locations for a second round. Afterwards, the full group debriefs with several people sharing an idea or example that surprised or excited them. This can work in person or online using breakout groups.

**Reference: Liberating Structure, 1-2-4 All exercise
<https://www.liberatingstructures.com/1-1-2-4-all/>*



Acknowledgments

This resource was written by Sarah Clark, Senior Associate at ICL, with contributions from Pri Ekanayake, Dianne Russell, and Sarah Dietz.



info@icl.org