

ONCE UPON A TIME

Using Story-Based Activities to Develop Breakthrough Communication Skills

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Storytelling Energizers

Story Energizer

1. Grab Bag

2. Start Finish Start

3. Stone Soup

4. I Remember When . . .

5. Musical Story

6. Match Maker

7. If I Were . . .

8. Genie in a Bottle

9. Story Interrupts

10. Reverse Plots

Objective

Use random objects to stimulate impromptu storytelling.

Create an improvised story as a group.

Explore the stories connected to common objects.

Use “key moments of life” and fictitious events to trigger stories.

Use a piece of music to stimulate people to tell a story.

Transform people’s fun facts into a storytelling game.

Place people in contrived situations to prompt zany stories.

Imagine the consequences of a fulfilled wish and tell a story about it.

Discover how stories are present in conversations all the time.

Imagine alternative scenarios to well-known movies.

1. Grab Bag

Use random objects to stimulate impromptu storytelling.

Time Required: Three minutes to set up the exercise, two minutes per person

- Create a bag filled with random objects (anything works, e.g., paperweight, pens, toys, etc.). Be wacky but use good judgment. To spice things up, try throwing in an object that is representative of the organization.
- Have people select an object. If it’s a small group, have everyone select an object from the bag; otherwise determine how much time you want the exercise to take and ask for an appropriate number of volunteers.
- Instruct people they have two minutes to think of a story about their objects. It doesn’t matter if it’s a real story from their experience or a made-up story. There is no need to provide too much guidance—let people have fun with it.

2. Start Finish Start

Create an improvised story as a group.

Time Required: Ten minutes

- If possible, have people sit in a circle. Inform them that they will be working as a group to make up a story on the spot in “real time.” This exercise works equally well with a small group (five person minimum) or with large groups.

For large groups, ask for volunteers and arrange a circle of chairs in the front of the room, or if the room does not permit it, have people stay where they are.

- Start a story, “Once upon a time. . .” Fill in the first sentence or two. I try to incorporate subjects and details relevant to the group, but it’s not necessary. Let the story go where it will. Each person adds to the story by filling in a few sentences and then handing it off to the next person. Continue this way one or two times around the circle. You can be the designated story-ender or randomly inform a participant that he or she must finish the story.

3. Stone Soup

Explore the stories connected to common objects.

Time Required: Three minutes per object, two-minute debriefing at the end

- Call on a participant to point to any object in the room. It can be anything, so don’t worry about how mundane the object might be. That’s part of the beauty of this exercise.
- Ask for three volunteers to act as storytellers. One must offer a story explaining where the object came from, the second volunteer must offer a story of how it came into being, and the third must offer a story of how the object got into the room.
- After the stories are finished, see whether anyone else in the group has any other story to add.
- Conduct a mini debriefing at the end of the exercise. People are surprised at how many interconnected dependencies and stories there are behind a simple day-to-day object that we tend to take for granted. This insight can be applied to many organizational and interpersonal situations.

4. I Remember When . . .

Use “key moments of life” and fictitious events to trigger stories.

Time Required: Two minutes per person

- Prepare a stack of index cards with “I remember when. . .” phrases that reference both real-life events and fictitious ones. Here are some examples to get you started:

Real Events. . .

I remember when I took my first trip to a foreign country.

I remember when I bought my first car.

I remember when I went on my first date.

I remember when I had my first job interview.

Fictitious Events . . .

I remember when I won my first grand-prix racing event.

I remember when I walked on the moon.

I remember when I had dinner with [insert famous person of your choice].

I remember when I starred in my first block-buster movie.

(*Note:* Sometimes it's fun to let the participants come up with the phrases).

- If everyone will not be doing the exercise, ask for volunteers. Have people select an index card at random. Give them a minute to prepare their stories.

5. Musical Story

Use a piece of music to stimulate people to tell a story.

Time Required: Four minutes per piece of music

- Select some pieces of music to play. It's best to have the music queued up ahead of time.
- Play a piece of music for one or two minutes and then ask for volunteers to share a story invoked by the music. It can either be a real story (e.g., perhaps a memory evoked by the music) or it can be a story they make up based on how the music stirs their emotions and imaginations.

6. Match Maker

Transform people's fun facts into a storytelling game.

Time Required: Four minutes per fun fact

- Have everyone write down a fun or interesting personal fact that no one in the group knows.
- Draw a card at random and read the fact out loud. Ask the group to guess who this fun fact belongs to. Get three nominations.
- Have three nominees stand up and take turns telling a story about the fun fact.
- After all of the nominees have told their stories, ask the group to vote on whether they think the nominee is the person or not. Tally the votes.
- When the voting is complete, ask the person to whom the fun fact belongs to reveal him- or herself to the group. Give the person a chance to tell his or her story.