

# Team Building Opening Exercise

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Here is a very useful opening exercise I recently used with a client leadership team. The team leads a staff function within a major division of a global corporation. People work in two locations, two time zones apart. They meet regularly and virtually, but are seldom together in one room. Because of the demanding nature of their jobs, members seldom have time for collective reflection on how they are doing together as a leadership team. As a whole, they represent a relatively new team: the newest members having joined three months ago while others have been in their roles for a number of years. My client leads this group; he has been in his role for almost one year. Some of these characteristics might be familiar to you.

Their hoped-for outcomes are not unusual for a team development session, however, if you are familiar with *Extraordinary Groups*, you will see its influence on the outcomes of the day:

- Draft an inspiring team purpose
- Agree about meetings, communications, and collaborations
- Clear next steps for gathering input on the purpose statement and finalizing it.
- Increase our collective capacity as leaders
- Know each other better

To begin, I employed an engagement strategy that Geoff and I often use when introducing *Extraordinary Groups*. This activity is simple to use, always gets people enthusiastically engaged, and beautifully sets the context for accomplishing the outcomes I've outlined above.

## Steps to Follow

As it is described here it takes about an hour. To tighten up the time, allow only 10 minutes in step 4 and eliminate steps 6 and 8. In step 7, simply ask people to share the factors they had in common and have a short group discussion about those points. Make sure you pay attention to points made during this discussion that you might want to refer to later in the day.

1. Review the outcomes and agenda for the meeting. (2 minutes)
2. Tell them they are now going to get to know each other better while setting the context for the topics addressed during the day. (2 minutes)
3. Ask people to think of a time when they were involved with a group that they would describe with words such as *amazing*, *wonderful*, *surpassing expectations*, or even *magical*. This can be a

group from any part of their lives—school, sports teams, work, community involvement, family. Encourage each person to jot a few notes to about this group. In particular, ask *What helped this group to be so outstanding?* You might want to write this question on a flip chart or white board. Note: if people have a hard time identifying such a group, ask them to think of the very best group experience they can recall. (5 minutes)

4. Next, ask people to find a partner, ideally the person in the group they know least-well. Once seated, give them these directions:

*A) Briefly tell your partner the situation of the story: limit yourself to three sentences.*

*B) Discuss the factors that enabled the group experience to be so memorable.*

*C) Identify any factors that you have in common.* Note, if you have an uneven number of participants, pair up yourself with the person who doesn't have a partner. In such a case, you will have to watch the time carefully. (3 minutes).

5. Sit back and enjoy watching the pairs take off! Call time half way through, allowing 7 minutes for each person in the pair. (15 minutes)
6. Ask people to bring their conversations to a close. This may take a few minutes, depending on how involved people have become in their conversations. (4 minutes)
7. Ask: *What was it like for you to share these stories with one another?* Take a few comments or observations, encouraging people to play off each others' thoughts. (5-7 minutes)
8. Then say you'd like to build a list of the factors that enabled such wonderful experiences. On flip charts or a white board, ask people: *What helped your experiences to be so wonderful?* Go from pair to pair, collecting one new item from each pair and recording it. Continue until there are no more to add or you've made two swings around the group. (10 minutes)
9. Then ask, *What are the implications for us in this list? What do we particularly want to remember from this exercise as we move through our agenda today?* Simply listen to the responses. Pay attention to points you might want to raise later in the day. (5-7 minutes).

This will focus the team well for the work ahead of them, create lots of fun, and bring great energy into the room. Good luck!