

LET'S DO CHEMISTRY

"What's in the Box?" Improv Game

This exercise can help illustrate the importance of asking good questions, listening to responses, and building off each other's ideas to develop a back-and-forth conversation. Participants will strengthen creativity while practicing listening and the acceptance of new ideas.

Skill sets

Asking questions, listening and accepting offers, creativity, responsiveness

Time to implement

5-10 minutes

Number of participants

8-10 per group

For example:

One participant holds a mimed box in their hands. Their partner asks "What's in the box?". The person with the box says it's a gift and hands it their partner. The partner opens the box and defines the contents. ("It's a semi truck.") The partner giving the gift responds with a reason the item meets their partner's needs. ("I knew you were moving this weekend and thought you might need a big truck.") The person receiving the gift reinforces the reason and adds information to support it. ("It's perfect. My mom didn't want me to move in my little Honda Civic.") The partners switch roles and repeat the exercise.

Exercise flow

1. Divide a larger group into smaller groups of 8-10 people.
2. Designate a section of the room for each group to gather. (*Sound can be an issue, so try to give each small group a private location.*)
3. Have the smaller group form two lines... *Line A* and *Line B*.
4. Explain that the first participant in *Line A* steps forward holding a mimed box in their hands. (*The box can take any shape, size, or weight.*) The participant in *Line B* then steps forward and asks... "What's in the box?"
5. Tell the group that *Person A* says that the box is a gift and hands it to *Person B*.
6. Explain that *Person B* opens the box and defines the content, with whatever they imagine. (i.e., An elephant... thank you!) (*The box can contain absolutely anything. Encourage the group to make the gifts positive items that are work-appropriate.*)
7. Ask for a volunteer to help demonstrate this action. Have the volunteer be *Person B*.
8. Explain that next *Person A* gives a specific reason for giving the gift to *Person B*. The reason should explain how the gift meets one of their partner's needs. (*"I thought you might need that elephant for your expedition across the mountains."*)
9. Demonstrate this action using the gift defined by the volunteer.
10. Explain that *Person B* accepts the reason given by their partner and adds information to help support it. (*"The elephant is perfect. Pixar nabbed all my donkeys for a live-action version of Shrek."*)

11. Ask the group if there are any questions.
12. Explain that after the exchange, both participants move to the back of the opposite line. (*Person A goes to Line B; Person B goes to Line A*).
13. Begin the exercise with the next two participants from the lines. Repeat until each person has completed both sides of the exercise.
14. Stop the group and quickly debrief about the experience.

Debrief questions

1. How did you know what was in the box? What did you do to figure out what was inside? (*You just improvised... Everyone is an improviser.*)
2. Who thought that the object in the box was something different than what their partner said?
3. How would you describe your experience in this exercise? What helped us be successful? (*Ask clarifying and probing questions to elicit more information.*)
4. What techniques did you use to come up with a specific reason that the gifts were great?
5. How could you apply these techniques to engaging with participants? What is a specific example from your experience?

Tips

Encourage those giving reasons to be as specific as possible. Side-coach to keep the statements and reasons positive.

Participant in the activity as much as possible and positively reinforce the partners.

If people are having a hard time coming up with things in the box you can offer a thematic suggestion such as “foods” “animals” “things in space.”

Variations

Small teams (8 or fewer people) or limited time with a larger group: Use the Roving Gift Givers variation below. Have the group work in partners.

Roving gift givers: Begin the exercise in partners; *Person A* and *Person B*. Follow the same exercise flow as above. (*Person A gives box to Person B*) After the exchange is complete both partners split to find new people. All of the participants that were *Person B* in the first exchange now hold mimed boxes. Those people that were *Person A* approach one of the other participants holding a mimed box and ask them “What’s in the Box?” Continue to repeat as time allows.

Negative gifts/Positive reasons: Ask the group to repeat the same activity, but fill the boxes with items that would not be good gifts (*“fingernail clippings” “world hunger” “sadness” or “rotten food”*). Explain that both participants should respond with a positive statements and reasons why that is a perfect gift.

Loaded questions: *Person B* opens the box and positively declares the contents (*“Thank you. I always wanted a kangaroo”*). *Person A* asks an open-ended question about how *Person B* plans to use the gift for a specific task. (*“How are you going to use a kangaroo to help with your math?”*) *Person B* then responds with a specific way the object will benefit them. (*“The kangaroo can carry my extra math books, so I’m not so tired when I study.”*)

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This improv game was adapted by Sciencenter from an exercise developed by the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago, IL and shared with the NISE Network in 2012. The NISE Network has more improv games and ideas here, <http://www.nisenet.org/catalog/improv-exercises>.

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