

JUMPSTART STORIES – an interactive way to start an event and build connections

From: *Story Guide – building bridges using narrative techniques*, Swiss Agency for Development & Cooperation

Providing a physical forum for fast exchange and selection, this is a transformative way to begin any event or gathering. The process introduces each person to other participants in a meaningful way, establishing warm connections through a common experience.

In June 2003 the gender team used ‘Jumpstart Stories’ method to catalyse the formation of a new “knowledge community” at their large inaugural gathering of gender practitioners in Fribourg, Switzerland. The experience touched several members so deeply that they were compelled to change the nature of their planned presentations to incorporate stories and examples from the field. This helped set the tone of warm exchange over the week that followed.

Materials

- A bell/gong
- A large open space
- Possible sound recording equipment

Method

Round One

1. Place the participants into groups of up to 10. Move the chairs to one side – the exercise is run standing up.
2. Ask the participants to take a moment to think of a moment from their own professional experience when (for example) they felt really inspired.
3. Each person in the group has 90 seconds to share their story.
4. A bell is sounded at the end of each 90-second stint to signal the start of a new story.

Round Two

5. When all the 10 stories are heard, the group splits up with each person finding a new group of 9 others. When everyone is settled each person has 90 seconds to tell the same story again.

Clusters and Chains

6. Each person recalls the story that most resonated with them, or the story that most inspired them.
7. Everybody moves to find the person who told this story and puts their hand on his or her shoulder.
8. The facilitator asks for a show of hands of all those who have one hand on their shoulder, then two, then three. The aim is to find the top three stories in the room (ie, the tellers with the most hands on their shoulders).
9. The top 3 stories are told in plenary.
10. Each story can be told followed by 20 seconds of silence rather than applause. The audience is encouraged to notice how the story engages them.
11. Each story is given a name that conveys some aspect of its essence.

Variations

With sufficient time, and a large enough group (over 45) a third round of storytelling (again, the same story) may be inserted between steps 5 and 6.

Build in discussion afterwards, prompting people to reflect on what struck them about the stories. This depends on the context in which you are running the exercise.

Record the top 3 stories when they are told in plenary, for example if your intention is to catalyse the formation of a new network or community. It will be important to be sure that the tellers are comfortable with this arrangement.

Guidance Notes

- The story prompt statement is tailored for your own specific needs. For example “think of a moment when you felt you became part of a team or community” or “think of a moment when you were working successfully in partnership with others”. The question can be worded to prompt sharing of a more or less personally emotional experience. ‘Think of a moment when you were really moved by inspiration in the field’ will yield a different telling to ‘think of a moment when you witnessed innovation’. This will create a different relationship between the teller and the story. Great care should be taken to test the prompt to make sure it is likely to yield the right stories.
- Watch out: if there are tables, people tend to migrate towards sitting around the table. It is important to keep people standing up and huddled together to listen as the physical intimacy of the experience is an important part of it. You also need to be culturally sensitive. It may be culturally inappropriate for women and men to touch each other on the shoulder, so you may need to establish another gesture of connection that has the same kind of surprise effect. Also, be careful not to reveal the final twist before the rounds of storytelling have been conducted, or this will change the way people are listening to each other.

Thanks to Seth Kahan www.sethkahan.com