Dividing People into Groups

Breaking into smaller groups can be a great time to energize the group, foreshadow the activity to come, prepare the group for success by ensuring each small group has the right people in it… and it can done quickly and efficiently. It can also be done ineffectively and take a very long time, creating confusion and chaos along the way.

To ensure an effective and efficient division of a larger group into multiple smaller groups, be sure to reflect carefully on when and how you will divide the group prior to beginning the activity. As a general rule, it is best to give instructions to an activity *prior* to asking participants to get up and move to a new location to work with a new group of people. This is because the act of moving creates noise: people move, chat and are no longer listening. Standing with a group of new people often invites new conversations. Thus it *usually* is more effective to: 1) tell people they will be moving, 2) ask them to listen to the instructions they will follow once they arrive at their new location, 3) give them the instructions, 4) ask them to move.

Once you have decided when you will divide people into groups, thoughtfully consider how to do so. Here are some fun ways of quickly and efficiently grouping people:

Crossed arms: Have group stand. Ask them to cross their arms. Everyone whose right arm was on top is in one group. Everyone whose left arm was on top is in the other. This is typically half and half. You can redistribute as needed.

Fun ways to count off:
- Stand in alphabetical order of first name, middle name, last name, etc. Then count off into the number of groups you are doing.
- Stand in order of how far you came to be here. Then count off into the number of groups you are doing.
- By order of birthday.
- For skits: Make a continuum from "dreams in skits" to "doing skits is to my soul, what nails on a chalkboard is to my ears." Then count off into the number of groups you are doing. This ensures that the skit lovers are evenly distributed.
- For drawing: Continuum from "love it, love it, love it" to "can't draw a stick figure."
- For activities that requires deep knowledge of community: Make a continuum from "Have lived here all my life" to "just arrived." Count off into the number of groups needed and redirect. Then count off into number of desired groups.
- For activities that require strong attention to detail: From "loves details" to "loves the big picture."

Additional Breakout Ideas

A-Z: Have people consider something with eyes closed that somewhat relates to current activity (examples: favorite leader, favorite place traveled, favorite local asset, personal leadership trait, etc.). Then have them think of the first letter of that thing. Break them up alphabetically. A-F at one flip chart, G-M, etc., based on the number of groups you need. Give a few minutes for folks to share in their group, ask for any highlights and move on to activity.

Birthdays: Form subgroups by birth months. For example, participants can be divided into three roughly equal-size groups by composing groups of those born in January, February, March, and April; May, June, July, and August; and Sept., Oct., Nov., and Dec. Can redistribute as needed.

Groups: Randomly hand out cards/paper with images such as bacon, egg, sausages (one on each card), strawberries, blueberries, blackberries, and other such groups of things. Then get them to find someone with a card that 'goes' with their card.

Find your herd: Have small sheets of paper with names of animals on them, one for each participant. You'll want one animal per group you want to break up into. For example if you want four groups you could use cow, goose, fox and tyrannosaurus rex. Ask folks to find their "herd" without showing others their slip of paper. Once they find their herd, you can redirect them to the correct location. Depending on the activity, you could select animals (or really anything that makes noise), that relate to the content.

If already at table groups: Ask the person with the most recent and next birthday, most talkative, latest up, etc. at the table to move one table clockwise. This is quick and gives the chance to sing happy birthday if there was or will be one.

Cut it up: Have comic strip or picture. Cut into pieces, have people with same comic strip or picture come together.

Movie time: Cost of your first movie. Up to $1.50, $1.50 to $3, $3 to $5, and $5 and up. Will break up groups roughly generationally. Can do with line up by when used computer for the first time.

Dots: Stick differently colored dots on cards or on their place names (if you use them) or on their materials. Ask them to find similar colors.

Sock pairs: Have a bag of (preferably washed) socks – each picks one then finds their pair. For larger groups pairs join other pairs by size or color to form larger sub-groups.

Candy time: Hand out different flavors of gum, colored hard candy. Have everyone join the others with the same flavor, color or name to form a group.

Picture perfect: Place pictures of classic cars (or anything) in different areas of the classroom. Ask the participants to gather under the one they like most or least.

Stack the deck: Playing cards are a great tool for creating groups of two, three and four. Prepare ahead of time by creating your own stacked deck of cards with one card for each participant. Stack your deck with two, three or four-of-a-kind cards, corresponding with the number of participants per group. Make sure the deck is shuffled. Pass out cards to each participant. Ask participants to find the other participants who have the same numbered/face card.

Using playing cards to form small groups is particularly helpful when you want to have participants work in pairs and then combine the pairs to create groups of four.

Mix-it-yourself: Give the desired mix and ask participants to form their own groups. For example:
- Gender Balance. Groups of four each to have two women and two men.
- Community Balance. Groups of four that represent each of the four communities present.
- Interest Spread. Groups of five each to include at least one person interested in the community economy and another in its schools.
- Experience Spread. Include at least one person who is expert in this area and one person who is new to the field.