



Organizing Small Groups for Training

Adapted From: Training For Dummies

Small groups are critical to a well-designed training program. A handful, rather than a horde, of people gathered together have a greater chance of becoming involved and actively participating in training — and in taking a valuable experience with them into their real-world roles. Here are some reasons why small groups afford a rich learning environment:

- Small groups provide an opportunity for more people to have more "air time" to express opinions, add ideas, and ask questions.
- Small groups allow individuals to receive feedback more quickly.
- Small groups allow participants to learn from each other.
- Small groups create opportunities for more people to practice skills or apply knowledge at the same time.
- Learning becomes more dynamic and active in small groups.
- Small groups encourage participants to know each other better, breaking down barriers and creating a more positive learning atmosphere.

Small groups are a great way to encourage participation, but using the grade-school method of counting off by fours or fives is not a very creative process. A little planning before you form small groups ensures that the participants will be successful and all content is addressed.



Arrange participants in small groups prior to giving activity instructions. If you begin with activity instructions and follow with instructions about how you want small groups to form, many participants will have forgotten the initial instructions by the time they have settled into their small groups.

Count off

Of course you can count off. But do it backward instead. To break into five groups count off backward from five, "five, four, three, two, one, five." Be sure to stay with the group. Adults can get really confused on this one!

You may also teach participants to count to five in a foreign language — Spanish, German, French, Chinese — and ask them to count off in their new language. This adds a nice touch if the language is one of your participant's first language. It also creates interesting discussion in a diversity training session.

Noise level

Identify sounds that participants could make to form small groups. For example, have participants think of the first vowel sound in their names. Have them make that sound and find others making that same vowel sound. When they find their group, they find a place to sit prior to receiving instructions.

You could have participants think of their favorite color. Have everyone stand and say their color out loud, finding others who are saying the same color.

Have participants think of the last digit of their phone numbers. Have them say the number until they find other with the same number. Realize that you may have ten small groups anytime you request something as open-ended as this one. You may also have participants

whose digit doesn't match anyone's. Quickly pair up strays or assign them to one of the smaller groups that has already formed.

Go to your corners

Identify reasons for people to go to separate places in the training room. For example, you could have them go to four corners depending on whether they are a first born, last born, middle, or only child in their family. They could go to the corner of the room that is closest to the direction they would head to go home (as a crow flies.)

You can connect the corners to content. For example, if you're training a business-communication class, you could have them select the method of communication they prefer, for example, e-mail, face-to-face, telephone, or notes.

Secret codes

Code the participants' materials in various ways. Purchase stickers and place them on the training materials, under the participants' chairs, on the outside or inside of the table tents, or on nametags. If you distribute a limited number of different-color markers participants use to write their names on their table tents, you can refer to the color marker they choose. Handouts for an activity can be copied on different colors of paper. Put participants into groups based on the color of paper they choose. You may also write numbers or letters on the back of participant notebooks. Use several colors of pens or folders.

Puzzling participants

Purchase or make four- to six-piece puzzles. Participants select a puzzle piece and find the rest of the pieces to their puzzle to form a small group. More puzzle pieces than participants? Paper clip two pieces together from the same puzzle.

Small blank puzzles are available from a party goods or office supply store. Add a personal message that is revealed after the small group puts all their pieces together.

Puzzles do not always have to "fit" together physically. You could write the names of people (or fictional characters) who "fit" together on index cards. You could use, for example, Alice, Cheshire Cat, Mad Hatter, and the Queen of Hearts; or you could use Snoopy, Charlie Brown, Lucy, and Pig Pen. You could select television characters, political figures, movie characters, or even "characters" from your organization.

Make mine different

You don't always need to form a group based on what is similar. You could form by what is different. This is particularly good for times when you want to form pairs and you have already had them work with the individuals to their left and their right.

Have participants find someone to work with who is different in some way. Find a partner who has different-colored hair or eyes from yours. Wearing shoes with laces? Find someone who is not. Find someone whose birthday is in a different month from yours.