



BUILDING YOUR TEAM

A PROBLEM-SOLVING ICEBREAKER GUIDE

FACILITATOR'S GUIDE

REVERSE BRAINSTORMING

A Problem-Solving Meeting Icebreaker

Ask a room how to succeed and you get silence. Ask how to sabotage the quarter, and every hand goes up — then flip every bad idea into a real prevention plan.

Building Your Team
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Ask How to Fail, Not How to Succeed



Reverse Brainstorming inverts the traditional exercise: instead of asking a team how to succeed, it asks "how could we fail?"

Ask that same room how to sabotage the quarter, and every hand goes up. In about 20 minutes with minimal prep, the activity generates real risk identification that a standard brainstorm rarely surfaces this fast. This paper walks a facilitator through materials, group-size guidance, the full five-step run, sample sabotage prompts, and why the exercise only works if the facilitator pushes past the funny part.

~20 min

total time for the activity

6–60

participants; optimal group size

3

risks voted on and assigned owners at the end

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Materials and Group Size



The setup is standard brainstorming gear, aimed at a very different question.

- **A whiteboard or flip chart.**
- **Markers**, one per small group.
- **Sticky notes or index cards.**
- **A project description sheet.**
- **A visible timer.**

The optimal size is 6 to 60 participants, run either as small groups of 3 to 4 people or as a single large circle. A virtual option uses breakout rooms with shared documents. Round tables or clustered seating work best in person, and groups larger than 30 should assign a note-taker per table.

Run the Icebreaker



Five steps take the room from a sabotage question to an assigned, deadline-backed risk register.

1 Display the sabotage question

Post a prompt such as “How could we absolutely ruin this project?”

2 Generate failure ideas

Give groups 4 minutes to brainstorm. “Quantity beats quality at this stage” — don't slow the group down to vet ideas yet.

3 Share the worst three

Each group shares their three worst failure ideas. Keep the pace brisk.

4 Convert to prevention statements

Turn each failure into a prevention statement and display the pair side by side.

5 Vote and assign owners

Vote on the three most likely risks and assign owners with deadlines before the meeting ends.

Sample Prompts



A sharp sabotage question is what makes the ideas flow.

- “ *How could we absolutely ruin this project?*
- “ *What would guarantee that this launch misses its date?*
- “ *Name the fastest way to lose this client.*
- “ *If you wanted to make this meeting useless, what would you do?*

Why This Approach Succeeds

The energy in the room is only half the value — the other half depends on what the facilitator does with it.

FACILITATION NOTE

Reverse brainstorming fails when the facilitator stops at the funny part. Steps 4 and 5 — converting failures into prevention statements and assigning owners — are what convert the exercise into an actionable risk register rather than entertainment.

Debrief questions that reinforce this include asking which failure on the list is already happening somewhere, what made the bad ideas easier to generate than good ones, who outside the room needs to see the three risks, and what would change if the exercise ran again in ninety days.

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ABOUT



Building Your Team is a division of The Leaders Institute®, the company that pioneered the Build-A-Bike® charity team-building activity in 2005. Building Your Team publishes practical, field-tested team-building activities and facilitation guides for corporate meeting planners, HR leaders, and event professionals.

Want us to facilitate this activity for your group?

Talk with our team about running Reverse Brainstorming, or another meeting icebreaker, for your group.

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