

Birds-of-a-Feather: A Unique and High-Energy Way to Begin a Training Session.

By Sharon L. Bowman, MA

Professional Speaker and Corporate Trainer
Director, The Lake Tahoe Trainers Group

P.O. Box 564, Glenbrook, NV 89413
Phone: 775-749-5247 Fax: 775-749-1891
E-Mail: SBowperson@aol.com Web-Site: www.Bowperson.com



The best opening activities have three important outcomes:

1. They help training participants form a psychologically safe, productive learning community by getting learners connected to each other before the information part of the training begins.
2. They connect the training participants to the training topic so that learners become aware of what they already know and the knowledge they bring to the training.

3. They connect learners to what they hope to learn from the training – what skills and new knowledge they want to walk away with when the training is over.

Unfortunately, many trainers have little time to create an opening activity that does all three.

Often trainers choose to have trainees quickly stand and introduce themselves (which doesn't really connect learners to each other at all).

Or trainers may choose an activity that is fun but that has no connection whatsoever to the topic of the training.

Or, because of time constraints, trainers may not even do an opening activity. Instead, they introduce themselves, tell and

joke or story, and then plunge into their information delivery.

This opening activity is one of the best to use in a training because:

- ✓ The three important outcomes of an effective opening occur as a result of doing it;
- ✓ It is designed to help learners make important connections quickly and effectively, without taking up a large amount of training time;
- ✓ It can be done in as little as three minutes or as long as fifteen minutes;
- ✓ It's flexible enough to be used not only as an opening activity, but also as a review activity in the middle of a training and as a closing activity at the end of the learning experience;
- ✓ There are a number of variations to the activity so that the trainer never has to do it the same way twice in one training;
- ✓ The processing is built into the activity itself as it is experienced.

Suggested Time: from 3 - 15 minutes

Materials Needed:

- ✓ One chart stand and tablet (set up in the front of the room, visible to all – or an overhead projector and screen will do also) with the following questions printed in large bright print on one page (or on a transparency):

What three things do you already know about the training topic?

Why are you attending this training and what do you hope to learn?

What is one question you want answered by the end of the training?

- ✓ A Random Response Device (a koosh ball or other soft throwable object)

Group Size: The larger the group the better; a dozen people is about the minimum number needed to make it work; it can easily accommodate over one hundred as long as there is space to move around.

Room Set-Up: Participants will need to have room enough to move around, so a breakout space at the back of the room or large aisles and space in front and in back are necessary. The amount of space needed depends upon the size of the group – the larger the group, the more space required. Furniture can remain in place as long as there is room to walk around tables and chairs.



Procedure:

- 1 You tell the participants that there are some people in the room who are absolutely crucial to their learning success in this training. In order to find these people and begin a dialogue with them, the participants will need to take part in a “Birds-of-a-Feather” people hunt.
- 2 You explain that they need to think of the first word or phrase that comes to their minds when they think of the training topic.
- 3 Direct them to stand and walk around the room repeating their word or phrase out loud to others until they find two or three other participants who thought of the same or similar word/phrase as theirs. Allow about 30 seconds for them to form standing groups of 3-5 people with others who have words/phrases similar to theirs. If someone is left out, invite that person to join any group, or to make a group with others who don’t yet have a group.
- 4 Direct their attention to the chart or overhead transparency. Tell them they will have about 30 seconds each to answer the first question. Give them about 2 minutes total time, then signal for silence.
- 5 To process the answers, use a Random Response Device (the koosh ball) and let them know that, when the koosh ball is thrown to their group, one person needs to repeat *what someone in their group said* (which helps build more psychological safety than if they had to repeat what they themselves said).

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- 6 That group then tosses the koosh ball to another group and so on until all or most groups have had a chance to share one response.
- 7 Tell them to say farewell (or give a high-five to their new friends) and now think of a sport that could represent the topic. Direct them to find new standing partners who thought of the same or similar sport.

Example: In a communication skills training, the sports mentioned might be team sports like football, baseball, etc. Or the sport may be a metaphor for the topic, i.e., raquetball for an accounting training because you have to know all the angles). They quickly introduce themselves to their new group partners.
- 8 Direct them to answer the second question. Give them about two minutes, then process with the Random Response Device in the same way that you did the first time. You might also ask them to name the sport and why they thought of it as a representation of the training topic.
- 9 For the final question, they say farewell to their group. They think of a word that describes how they are feeling about being at the training, and they find two or three others with the same/similar words.
- 10 In their final standing group, they share their answers to the third question.
- 11 At this point, you can either process the questions in the same fashion by tossing the Random Response Device, or you can ask them to come up with a group question – like a composite of the questions they shared – and say it aloud while you write it on a chart paper. Or they can write it on a 3x5 card or scratch paper and hand it to you.
- 12 When done, invite them to give high-fives once again to their new friends and then sit down.



You now have a group of training participants who:

- * Feel psychologically safer with each other because they have connected with a number of others in the room;
- * Have begun the process of forming a productive learning community;
- * Have focused on the prior knowledge they have and will later connect it to the new information they will learn;
- * Have also become aware of their own learning goals and questions they want asked, in effect, their own “Why?” for being there.

Depending upon the size of your whole group, the time you choose to spend doing the activity, the amount of processing you choose to do (not all groups have to answer if time is an issue), and the richness of the dialogue, the activity can be a short one (3–5 minutes) or a longer one (5–15 minutes).

Variations:

1. You can tailor the questions to be more specific to the topic, or phrase them as review questions if you choose to do the activity after you

have presented new information. Or the questions can summarize the learning for a closing activity, for example:

What are the three most important things you learned during this training?

What do you plan to do with what you learned?

How will this information change your behavior?

Who are three people you can share this information with?

2. Besides having participants form standing “Birds-of-a-Feather” groups with similar words/phrases or metaphors like sports, they can also form groups according to the following:

Find 2-3 other people who ...

like the same junk food that you do;

like the same genre of movie or book that you do;

like the same hobby;

like the same fantasy vacation;

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are wearing the same colored shoes;

are wearing the same jewelry item;

were born in the same season;

have the same first or last name initial;

have the same kind of pet;

hate the same sport;

enjoy the same free-time activity;

were born in the same state;

have visited the same historical site;

The list can go on and is only limited by your imagination.

3. Besides the metaphor of a sport to represent the topic, you can ask the participants to think of an animal that represents the topic, or something in nature, a kitchen item, a color, a food, a famous person, a TV show or movie, etc.

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Contribution by: Sharon Bowman

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Author and traveling teacher Sharon Bowman helps educators and business people “teach it quick and make it stick,” - fine-tuning their information-delivery skills and turning their passive listeners into active learners.

Sharon is the author of six popular teaching, training, and motivation books, including: “*Preventing Death by Lecture*,” “*Presenting with Pizzazz*,” “*How To Give It So They Get It*,” and “*Shake, Rattle, and Roll*.” She is a member of the National Speakers Association and the director of The Lake Tahoe Trainers Group.

She is also the “Trainer’s Coach,” helping individual teachers and trainers polish existing lessons and training programs, and creating new ones that reach all learners.

For more information about Sharon Bowman and her books and training, log onto www.Bowperson.com, or email her at SBowperson@aol.com.

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