

A photograph of three women laughing together, overlaid with a teal diagonal graphic. The woman in the center has curly hair and is wearing a yellow shirt. The woman on the right has her hair in a bun and is wearing a light green shirt. The woman on the left is partially visible, smiling.

THE OPENING AND CLOSING RITUALS OF A GATHERING

What Are Opening and Closing Rituals?

Together, the opening and closing ritual are the bonding and connecting “bookends” for any gathering, intended as a regular practice for groups that come together one time or repeatedly.

Building trust, shared purpose and group identity

The goals of an opening ritual activity are to build trust, to create connections among the participants and on an interpersonal level allowing for each person to be seen and known in a multi-dimensional way (i.e. I am not only a Marketing Manager, but also an avid hiker). A closing ritual ensures that the meeting leaves everyone feeling more connected to each other and the purpose of the group.



Designing Opening and Closing Rituals

An Opening Ritual is a simple prompt question, asked at the beginning of a gathering, that invites personal sharing related to the goals or context of the gathering.

Opening and Closing Rituals are best used for groups that meet repeatedly as a bonding ritual to build trust, safety and a higher common purpose. However, they can also be incorporated into stand-alone events to cultivate connection.

To decide whether and how to use an Opening and Closing Ritual, it's important to articulate clear goals for your gathering (more on this can be found in our tool for Transformative Meetings).

Ask yourself:

- What do you need to accomplish?
- Who will be there and what do you want people to experience and do?
- What's the culture and purpose of this group?
- What would success look like?

Depending on the size of the group and timing, this can be done in the full group, small groups or pairs. You may want to give a minute for people to think and jot down their thoughts before opening up for sharing so they can actively listen.

Sometimes structured activities can set a more playful, energetic tone – for example asking people to stand up, step in or stand along a line to identify common characteristics or differences along a spectrum; inviting small groups to find one thing they have in common; or moving around a room to find new partners to answer a prompt together.

What Are the Key Principles of an Opening Ritual?

Choose topics and activities that fit the group

- Keep in mind the size, previous acquaintance and your goals.
- For example, if people don't know each other well or you're in a formal work setting, choose less personal topics; if it's a bonded group that has built trust over time, you can go deeper.

Connect to the topic of the meeting or event:

- Services for seniors, you might ask participants to talk about an older person who inspired them.
- Building a work plan, ask for one thing you are excited about for the coming year.

Focus on something larger going on in the organization (changes, big launch, etc.):

- Challenges in internal communication, ask them to think of an excellent communicator and share why they are so effective.
- Building relationships with donors, you might ask participants to share a significant relationship they had with a donor.
- Survey results, you might ask, if you had a magic wand and could change anything in the organization, what would it be?

Create a prompt that encourages a deeper acquaintance (assuming that supports the goal of the meeting).

- What's rocking your world this month? What do you give a damn about? Can you share one thing about you that no one here knows?

- Where is your happy place? Share a picture (from your phone) of a moment that brings you joy?

Relate to the time of year (big event, an upcoming holiday, season, etc.).

- Before Rosh Hashana / New Years – something you are happy to leave behind for the year, something you look forward to next year.

Delegate ownership – involve group members in designing and leading these rituals.

Additional Opening prompts...

- Share a time when you felt you didn't belong, felt excluded or just different.
- What's the best lesson you've ever been taught and by whom?
- Who can you call when you need encouragement?
- Describe a moment of kindness.
- Describe an experience of loss that left you changed. How are you different as a result?
- What do you dream for your community?
- When did you feel most free in your life, and most constrained?
- What would your best friend say about who you are and what makes you tick?



What Are the Key Principles of a Closing Ritual?

A Closing Ritual should be simpler and shorter than an Opening Ritual – the goal is to give space at the end for participants to reflect on and hear each others' personal responses to the group and gathering. A quick go-around in just one minute can unify and connect the group before departing. For example, ask for one word or a short sentence in response to a question like:

- One thing I'm taking away from today
- I now know...I now feel...
- An "aha" moment. Something I will do differently from now on
- Thank one person who changed your thinking today

Most people find setting aside time for these activities pays off immediately and over time. Opening and Closing Rituals should be calibrated and designed for the goals and culture of your group (see below) and for this reason they are different from simple "ice breakers." They don't just "warm up" a group before moving to the real purpose, they further the purpose of the group.

Not everyone will be comfortable with Opening and Closing Rituals – and that's ok. You can and should take people a little (but not too far) beyond their habits and comfort zones to build trust and openness.