



Brainstorming – Keys to Successful Idea Generation

The purpose of this document is to present key ideas related to the Brainstorming to serve as a vehicle for discussion with the view to improve organizational effectiveness and efficiency.

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Creating productive individuals, teams, organizations and communities

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Brainstorming

Overview



Brainstorming as a technique has been used very successfully by groups to develop as many ideas as possible without evaluating how practical the ideas might be. Group brainstorming is just one of many powerful tools available to a facilitator. Experience and a broad body of peer-reviewed research on teams and organizations indicates that, when brainstorming sessions are managed correctly and skillfully linked to other work practices innovations are achieved.

The poorest brainstorming happens when the term is used loosely, and the rules aren't followed-or known-at all. Perhaps the biggest mistake that leaders make is failing to keep quiet and let the group do its magic. The biggest mistake is for a leader to start a meeting saying, "Let's brainstorm" and then proceed to spend the next 30 minutes sharing his or her own rambling thoughts, without a single idea coming from the others in the room. Now that's a loss of productivity!

There are some very simple rules that have worked since Alex Osborne developed the concept. Here are Alex Osborn's original four: 1) Don't allow criticism; 2) Encourage wild ideas; 3) Go for quantity; 4) Combine and/or improve on others' ideas. These rules still work today in fact if they are not followed the leader will quickly lose credibility. Teams may vary the rules. Two additional rules quite often utilized are: "One conversation at a time" and "Stay focused on the topic."

Brainstorming is really quite simple. To save groups from dissolving into disorder follow the basic original rules, add a few new ones by the Team. If the decision has already been made and / or you will not be following all of the basic four rules don't call it a brainstorming.

Overview



Brainstorming is most effective with groups of 3-5 and as large as 8-12 people and should be performed in a relaxed environment. If participants feel free to relax and joke around, they'll stretch their minds further and therefore produce more creative ideas. Brainstorming can still be used with large groups, the facilitator needs to design the session allowing for individual thought, small group brainstorming (3-5 people) building to a group of 8-12 people.

Brainstorming works best with a varied group of people. Participants should come from various departments across the organisation and have different backgrounds. Even in specialist areas, outsiders can bring fresh ideas that can inspire the experts.

A brainstorming session requires a facilitator, a brainstorming space and something on which to write ideas, such as a white-board a flip chart or wall space or software tool. The facilitator's responsibilities include guiding the session, encouraging participation and writing ideas down.

There are numerous approaches to brainstorming, but the traditional approach is generally the most effective because it is the most energetic and openly collaborative, allowing participants to build on each others' ideas. Creativity exercises, relaxation exercises or other fun activities before the session can help participants relax their minds so that they will be more creative during the brainstorming session.

The following are two excellent articles on brainstorming that will help you master this powerful tool.



Step by Step Process



Step by Step Process

1. Define your problem or issue as a creative challenge. This is extremely important. A badly designed challenge could lead to lots of ideas which fail to solve your problem. A well designed creative challenge generates the best ideas to solve your problem. Creative challenges typically start with: "In what ways might we...?" or "How could we...?" Your creative challenge should be concise, to the point and exclude any information other than the challenge itself. For example: "In what ways might we improve product X?" or "How could we encourage more local people to join our club?"
2. Give yourselves a time limit. We recommend around 25 minutes, but experience will show how much time is required. Larger groups may need more time to get everyone's ideas out. Alternatively, give yourself an idea limit. At minimum, push for 30-50 ideas.
3. Once the brainstorming starts, participants shout out solutions to the problem while the facilitator writes them down – usually on a white board or flip-chart for all to see. There must be absolutely no criticizing of ideas. No matter how daft, how impossible or how silly an idea is, it must be written down. Laughing is to be encouraged. Criticism is not.
4. Once your time is up, select the five ideas which you like best. Make sure everyone involved in the brainstorming session is in agreement.
5. Write down about five criteria for judging which ideas best solve your problem. Criteria should start with the word "should", for example, "it should be cost effective", "it should be legal", "it should be possible to finish before July 15", etc.
6. Give each idea a score of 0 to 5 points depending on how well it meets each criterion. Once all of the ideas have been scored for each criterion, add up the scores.
7. The idea with the highest score will best solve your problem. But you should keep a record of all of your best ideas and their scores in case your best idea turns out not to be workable.

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Eight Keys to Successful Brainstorming



Eight Keys to Successful Brainstorming

1. Use brainstorming to combine and extend ideas, not just to harvest ideas. Andrew Hargadon's *How Breakthroughs Happen* shows that creativity occurs when people find ways to build on existing ideas. The power of group brainstorming comes from creating a safe place where people with different ideas can share, blend, and extend their diverse knowledge. If your goal is to just "collect the creative ideas that are out there," group brainstorms are a waste of time. A Web-based system for collecting ideas or an old-fashioned employee suggestion box is good enough.
2. Don't bother if people live in fear. As Sigmund Freud observed, groups bring out the best and the worst in people. If people believe they will be teased, paid less, demoted, fired, or otherwise humiliated, group brainstorming is a bad idea. If your company fires 10% of its employees every year, for instance, people might be too afraid of saying something "dumb" to brainstorm effectively. It is better to have them just work alone.
3. Do individual brainstorming before and after group sessions. Alex Osborn's 1950s classic *Applied Imagination*, which popularized brainstorming, gave advice that is still sound: Creativity comes from a blend of individual and collective "ideation." Skilled organizers tell participants what the topic will be before a brainstorm. I once went to a session on how to give an "itch-less haircut," and, at the suggestion of the organizer, took a preliminary trip to a salon where I asked the stylist for a cut as "itch-free as possible" to jumpstart my thinking. At the brainstorm, I reported how tightly the stylist wrapped the cape around my neck and how she put talcum powder all over me—effective, if uncomfortable and messy measures.
4. Brainstorming sessions are worthless unless they are woven with other work practices. Brainstorming is just one of many practices that make a company creative, and it is of little value if it's not combined with other practices—such as observing users, talking to experts, or building prototype products or experiences—that provide an outlet for the ideas generated. Some of the worst "creative" companies that I've worked with are great at coming up with new ideas, but never actually get around to implementing them. A student and I once studied a team that spent a year brainstorming and arguing about a simple product without producing even a single prototype, even though a good engineer could have built one in an hour or two. The project was finally killed when a competitor came out with the product.

Eight Keys to Successful Brainstorming, continued



5. Brainstorming requires skill and experience both to do and, especially, to facilitate. In all of the places that I've seen brainstorming used effectively—Hewlett-Packard, SAP's Design Services Team brainstorming is treated as a skill that takes months or years to master. Facilitating a session is a skill that takes even longer to develop. If you hold brainstorms every now and then, and they are led by people without skill and experience, don't be surprised if participants "sit there looking embarrassed. That is how humans act when they do something new and have poor teachers.

6. A good brainstorming session is competitive—in the right way. In the best brainstorms, people feel pressure to show off what they know and how skilled they are at building on others' ideas. But people are also competitive in a paradoxical way. They "compete" to get everyone else to contribute, to make everyone feel like part of the group, and to treat everyone as collaborators toward a common goal. The worst thing a manager can do is set up the session as an "I win, you lose" game, in which ideas are explicitly rated, ranked, and rewarded.

7. Use brainstorming sessions for more than just generating good ideas. Brainstorms aren't just a place to generate good ideas. In many organizations, these gatherings support the company's culture and work practices in a host of other ways. Project teams use brainstorms to get inputs from people with diverse skills throughout the company. In the process, a lot of other good things happen. Knowledge is spread about new industries and technologies, newcomers and veterans learn—or are reminded—about who knows what, and jumping into a brainstorm for an hour or so to think about someone else's problem provides a welcome respite from each designer's own projects. The explicit goal of a group brainstorm is to generate ideas. But the other benefits of routinely gathering rotating groups of people from around a company to talk about new and old ideas might ultimately be more important for supporting creative work.

8. Follow the rules, or don't call it a brainstorm. This is true even if you only hold occasional brainstorms and even if your work doesn't require constant creativity.

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