

How to Brainstorm Effectively

By Ben Kleinman



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“We need new ideas and we need them now!”

-client

Brainstorming sessions bring together diverse groups of people to generate ideas about a problem in an intense meeting. Their purpose is to quickly generate many ideas from many sources. Brainstorms are an extremely effective way to solve problems because many heads are better than one and people feed off of each other's creativity.

Here are some tips to making the process more effective:

Know Why You Are There

Often the people setting up the brainstorming session are clear on what they need to accomplish, but unless the participants are informed, they will not be able to contribute effectively. A brainstorm is a session where any idea is considered, but one with a specific purpose.

To that end, it helps to have set guidelines. A single sentence communicated before the session begins gives people a chance to think about it. You can then use this sentence as a checkpoint during and after the session to see if you accomplished what you needed.



ben kleinman is a scientist in the science department at razorfish new york. (bk@razorfish.com)

This will not stifle creativity, gives the participants an idea to start from, and channels the discussion toward something productive. Dramatic insights and 'Aha!' moments happen when people build off other good ideas, not simply from an unstructured environment. The participants must be free to suggest anything, but have to start from the same foundation in order to understand each others' ideas.

Do Not Judge

Do not judge the ideas as they are presented. Not at all. This is the most important rule, for two reasons.

- 1) It wastes time, and redirects the conversation in a negative direction.
- 2) We are social creatures - nothing stops one's creative mood like being criticized.

The time for commentary is later. The session is about genesis, not analysis. Encourage people to participate with any and all of their ideas. In a brainstorm anything goes. Simply make sure that they are recorded. If an idea is good, people will recognize it and build on it. If an idea is weak, it will fade away. It is often not possible to know beforehand what will prove to be of value to the group as they generate ideas. Any spark could start a bonfire.

Be Interdisciplinary

To develop a wide array of ideas, invite people with a wide variety of skills. Too often, valuable insights are missed because a group did not invite outsiders to discuss a subject. The annoyance of explaining the problem often raises basic questions that insiders learn not to see. If strategists are the only people invited to a brainstorming session, it is unlikely that the answer



Useful, but better In groups

will be anything but a strategist answer. A designer might bring a whole new approach, which may spur the discussion to address an ignored angle. In a business situation, people who are not 'client facing' can provide a view that is not hindered by preconceptions received from the client.

Don't edit during a brainstorm, any spark could start a bonfire.

Brainstorm synergy combines simple elements to create something new. People can have their expertise refreshed by sharing it with other people. Bringing people with disparate views into the session, maximizes this effect. When considering the makeup of your group, consider people's styles of thinking. Although a brainstorm is often an exercise in non-linear thinking, linear thinkers can often build up an idea. Non-linear thinkers can develop a tangent that leads into a new direction. A mix of linear and non-linear thinkers is best.

More is Not Always Better

While it is important to include a range of backgrounds, it is also important to have the right number of people as well. A group that is too small may not have enough voices to sustain a continuous flow of creative sugges-

tions. Additionally, a small group probably does not possess a wide variety of perspectives (see above). Six is a good minimum number of people.



An insight (artist rendering)

A group that is too large is a problem too. When there are too many people, each competes for voice-share. Too many ideas and insights becomes more than chaotic, it becomes ineffective. There must be time to listen to the ideas to build on and expand the best ones. It is a natural inclination to want to make a point, but a good idea that refers to the beginning of the session will stop the development of the idea currently in play.

Each idea needs to be worked out, or there will be no results of the session. Twelve is a good maximum number of people for any one session. Remember, there is no reason you cannot hold two sessions with different participants.

Assign Roles

It helps to have roles for the people running the session. A two-person team works well. The facilitator leads the group, keeps an eye on the clock, and provides direction. They also answer questions about the agenda, the goal, and the strategy.

The note-taker documents the flow of ideas to get a fuller description of all the different ideas that are produced. Often, the only documentation of a brainstorm is what is written on the

easel pads during the session. An improvement is to leave the easel pad to the facilitator, as they can be copied later. The note-taker should concentrate on the key points in the discussion. What discussion points generate the easel notes?

Capture the Idea Flow

Capturing the flow of ideas, and drawing the links made during the conversation can explain the thoughts present in the meeting better than reconstructing it from what made it up to the easel pad. Too often the verbal, tacit information does not get recorded, but is essential for understanding the context of the ideas.

A group that is too large competes for voice-share, stopping existing ideas from being developed.

Along with noting the key points, noting the speaker of those points provides the opportunity to follow-up with individuals to gain clarity on what they said. Additionally, an analysis of the speakers and their remarks leads to an understanding of who may be especially valuable - or especially voluble. To be voluble is to turn, roll, waltz, evolve and revolve along with the flow of ideas.

Review

When typing the ideas generated, try to mix the direct output with the notes that were taken. This will provide a map of the parent and offspring ideas, will jog people's memories, add context, and show a timeline for the session.

Additionally, be sure to send out the compiled output to the participants to gather their feedback. Many times this step is skipped, and the results are

sent to other people on the project team who were not in attendance. If the participants are able to review the session, they may fix incorrect information, generate additional thoughts and ideas (maybe not specific to the task but perhaps the structure of the presentation), and it will also make them feel more valuable so that they are more likely to participate next time.

General Tips

Here are some small points to make your brainstorm sessions easier. It helps to use 'peel and stick' easel pads help the meeting flow more smoothly by avoiding the distracting taping-up-sheets process. Seat the people in a circle, so everyone can read each other's body language. Don't invite people if you don't want their input.

When it comes to solving problems, a good agenda and stimulated (and sometimes caffeinated) people can go a long way. A bit of orchestration and clear notes can expand it into a powerful means of developing ideas, fostering creativity, and delivering innovation.

for more information

Facilitating Brainstorming

http://www.3m.com/meetingnetwork/readingroom/ff_concepts_brainstorm.html

Brainstorming: The Dynamic New Way to Create Successful Ideas

Charles Hutchinson Clark

Creative Thinking and Brainstorming

J. Geoffrey Rawlinson

Technography

<http://www.technography.com>

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