

other people's words

It is better to have enough ideas for some of them to be wrong,
than to be always right by having no ideas at all.
– Edward de Bono, a leading authority on creativity

from blamestorming to brainstorming

In a case of political correctness going too far, an article appearing in the Belfast *Observer* this past June noted that the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment had banned the word “brainstorm” from its corporate vocabulary, insisting henceforth that idea meetings would be called “thought showers.”

Call it what you will, but the idea of generating ideas in a group setting is a relatively young concept, first introduced by Alex Osborn in 1948 in his ground-breaking book *Your Creative Power*. He outlined how brainstorming could stimulate and inspire creative thinking among a group of people by creating an atmosphere where ideas could be generated in a setting uninhibited of interruptions, judgement and censure.

Today, brainstorming is beyond being universal. Just because they're a pervasive part of every business manager's job (particularly for those in communications and marketing) doesn't mean they're effective and productive. Some of the world's most well-known creative gurus – Edward de Bono, Peter Drucker, Douglas Hall – have spoken how brainstorming is poorly managed because people don't know the true purpose of or how to conduct a brainstorm.

Brainstorming isn't difficult to lead, but it does require several basic elements to be considered in advance of the brainstorm itself. As the brainstorm's host, these basic tenets and tips will help you ensure nothing stands in the way of a brainstorm's ultimate purpose: to generate as many interesting, unusual and wild ideas.

No. 1 - Have a creative brief completed in advance. Start with two elements which sound like two essentially opposite things: your exact goal and purpose (*what should this idea help us achieve?*), and the specific reasons why you cannot achieve those goals (*what should this idea eliminate?*) The brief should be organized in a useful format which makes it easy to inform people about the specific nature of the situation and issues.

Tips

- There are many creative brief templates to use as a guide. If you don't have one, ask one of your marketing agencies or you can find simple versions on the Internet. (Alternatively, send me an email if you would like a sample).
- Spend quality time considering the answers to the brief's questions. Proper planning will help the brainstorm run more efficiently.
- Be concise with your answers. If it starts to resemble *War & Peace*, edit. Two pages is best.
- Send the brief to attendees in advance of the brainstorm, and let them re-review it a few minutes at the beginning of the meeting. Do not read the brief to your guests. It doesn't help for you to read the brief, and it wastes brainstorming time since attendees can read faster than you can speak.
- Answer people's questions as neutrally as possible. Don't add additional information. New information tends to be unnecessarily negative, filled with doubts, concerns and angst.
- Determine in advance of the brainstorm what criteria you will use to judge the best ideas. What attributes should the best idea demonstrate? **Do not** share the criteria with the participants in advance of the idea generation. (See No. 8 for more explanation, and the Note at the end.)

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No. 2 – Get a facilitator whenever possible. One of the most common mistakes is the brainstorm host playing a multiple role as the host, facilitator or participant of their own brainstorm. In a word, don't. It's better for you to participate objectively only as a participant. At the very least, sit quietly, listening and commenting positively on concepts and ideas you like. Don't let a negative word pass your lips.

Why have a facilitator? If you've ever had the chance to compare a brainstorm with one versus one without, you'll know it's the equivalent of a down mattress versus a bed of sharpened nails. (The element of pain in this metaphor is intended.) A good facilitator plays many important roles, but the most important is to be utterly neutral but engaging and enthusiastic. They encourage participants to be wildly creative, keeping the energy high so that ideas come quickly (less chance for negativity or focusing on one idea too soon). They create an atmosphere of freedom and no-risk, but always focusing on the problem, issue or need – as well as the time. They ensure everyone contributes by balancing the loud people with the quiet ones. Most of all, they never sit down. Actually, one more thing: they NEVER give up the pen.

Increase your comfort level by meeting with the facilitator in advance of the brainstorm so you are in agreement on the purpose and agenda of the brainstorm. In the meeting itself, let the facilitator facilitate. If you have comments or questions, direct them to the facilitator who can direct and focus the attendees.

No. 3 - Have a brainstorm agenda. A brainstorm is a meeting like any other, albeit a different type. Think through in advance how you want to spend the time. Most follow this common agenda:

- Review the brief so everyone understands the background, problem or need; answer questions.
- Review the purpose of the brainstorm: we need an idea which does (this).
- Play a warm-up or ice-breaker exercise to allow people to switch their mind, attitude and thinking to creative thinking – to “brainstorm mode” as I call it.
- Brainstorm ideas and concepts (see no. 7 below) – this should be 75 percent of the brainstorm, if not more.
- Edit, sort and combine the best ideas (the best ideas are often a combination of little ideas).
- Select the best ideas (finally, here is when you can toss out any idea you don't like!).

It's common to need more time after the idea selection to return to idea generation – to add more depth to some of the ideas which aren't completely realized. Also, don't forget that you might need to have multiple brainstorms if you're looking for something truly extraordinary or unusual. You spend days and weeks on the strategic planning: why only give yourself an hour to come up with the ideas? A tip: get a smaller group of people together for 30 minutes and stop, invite another small group in to brainstorm further and stop. Wait until the afternoon to brainstorm a bit more with new people. Sort and select ideas from all three brainstorms.

No. 4 - Invite the right people. And keep the wrong people out. It's not a cattle call, nor is it random. You want specific people, or people with specific skills. Four to eight people is ideal. More than 10 is not a brainstorm, it's a hostage situation. Here is the ideal group:

- You (the brainstorm host – if you can behave yourself) and one or two members of your core team only. Do not include only your own department or account team members. Often this group is most negative of all because they have been worn down over time by frustration with management or a bad client, have attended too many unproductive brainstorms. As they result they suffer from creative churn. ¹ Give your colleagues a mental break. If you want new ideas, get new people.
- People with considerable knowledge of either or both the purpose or key issues. This is not necessarily people who are members of the department or the account team. Look to other departments, or other account teams. Again, find fresh brains.
- People who fit the target profile, who can understand, appreciate or communicate how the ideas may be perceived or implemented. This might include people who have similar or relevant experience.
- Prolific idea people. These are individuals who can let fly a dizzying volume of ideas, 90 percent of which will be utterly useless, silly, unnecessary, illegal or unimplementable – and 10 percent which will be terrific, WOW, shocking, thrilling, compelling and exactly what you want. Very often these people are extremely attractive, but that's only my opinion of course.

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No. 5 - Create the right atmosphere. In other words, if it's not going to be fun, forget it. In his book *Creative Thinking in the Decision and Management Sciences*, James R. Evans accurately notes that "intellectual playfulness" (that is, having fun) is one of the most critical elements of the brainstorm process. Having fun or adding humour is important because it not only frees people from negative thinking, it stimulates thinking that will go beyond the pedestrian. Humour allows people to have fun with the problem, look to different solutions – often unusual solutions. This doesn't mean to have a laugh-fest without purpose: this is allowing people to explore new avenues and thought in context with the need or issue to solve.

Tips

- Create the right environment by having food and drink. The brain needs fuel to stimulate creative thinking.
- Have games and exercises to kick-start the brain as well as additional exercises at hand when the energy subsides. (The initial brainstorm 'rush' usually ends after the first 15-20 minutes.)
- Schedule your brainstorm when attendees' brains are most active. The best time is 10:00 am, which gives participants an hour to get day started, nor does it overlap into their lunch hour.
- Control distractions, especially from telephones of any kind.

No. 6 - Follow the brainstorm rules. The facilitator should outline the rules at the beginning of the brainstorm, and adhere to them religiously.

- **No bad ideas.** Defer judgment until all ideas are judged together.
- **Focus on the problem.** What do we have to impact or address? What are unusual ways to fix our problem?
- **Go for quantity, not quality.** Generate as many ideas as possible. Don't self-censure, just generate idea after idea. Wild ideas can often be turned into appropriate ones.
- **Build on ideas.** Make every idea better. Move beyond the obvious. 'Piggyback' on ideas to generate new and unusual combinations. Combine several small ideas into one bigger idea. Steal and adapt.
- **Write everything down.** Put all of the ideas on flipchart pages so everyone can read them. Encourage people to re-read pages to combine earlier ideas with later ideas. I don't encourage killing trees, but fill as many flipchart pages as possible. Also, write quickly not perfectly. You can clean up later.
- **Everyone participates.** And, no one dominates.
- **Have fun.** Welcome unusual, different, odd, strange and provocative ideas generated in a risk- and negative-free environment. What's the point of a brainstorm if you're only generating ideas you already have?

No. 7 – Generate as many ideas as you can, as fast as you can. Get started as quickly as possible. It's best if your ice-breaker naturally leads into the idea generation. You want a fast output: it will reduce the ability for someone to be negative, or prematurely focus on a single idea or concept. It's also infectious, and makes participants feel less pressured or self-critical. The moment the energy stops, start another creative exercise. Encourage people to combine, build on and cluster ideas together.

No. 8 - Conclude the brainstorm in the right way. Immediately declare success, it makes people feel valued and valuable. Cluster like ideas together. Look for common threads or concepts. Circle ideas which need a bit more brainstorming later on. Check if the ideas address the issue, meet the purpose or need. **Now** you can unveil the creative criteria you want the participants to use to select the best ideas. * (These should have been done in advance of the meeting, especially if you're doing the brainstorm on behalf of the brainstorm host who may not be attending the meeting.)

Look for ideas which are new, bold, original, novel, unique and/or compelling. Study the criteria for a moment, then ask everyone to select ideas which meet those standards. Use a democratic vote among all participants to select the ideas which meet all of the criteria. No right of authorship: everyone owns every idea, so don't vote only for your idea. Plastic dots are a simple way for people to vote directly on the flipcharts, but limit their 'votes' to 3-5 per person.

Finally, review the next steps and make someone accountable for writing-up the good notes. Thank everyone profusely, and allow the facilitator to sit down. You should be a bit tired but energized.

No. 9 – Take responsibility for the life of your ideas. The brainstorm is the easy and fun part. The difficult part is keeping the excitement you felt at the end of the brainstorm alive as you put pen to paper, fingers to keyboard. Like food pulled from the oven, ideas quickly lose their heat outside of the brainstorm, and you and your team will lose your interest. Turning your ideas into bullet points, paragraphs or summaries only compounds the problem more.

- If you don't know how to package the ideas, get someone with a visual 'eye' to help.
- If you don't have confidence in your ideas after the brainstorm, re-group with your team to re-inspire.
- If you aren't sure how to implement them, get advice from experts.
- If you aren't sure how to gain acceptance of your ideas, involve key people in the brainstorm, idea selection and packaging.
- If you believe you'll be taking a risk, turn to people who have had experience launching similar ventures.

It may seem on the surface that brainstorms are fun and games, but they're a vital business process and extremely valuable when the time and consideration is properly given. Ultimately, a good brainstorm of any type is the only way to bring your strategy to life, so don't ruin your initial efforts by last-minute preparation or indifferent participation. In the end, whether you like it or not, your company's ability to conduct a brainstorm is in direct proportion to the health of your company and its culture.

Besides, a brainstorm is the only time in your career when someone is going to pay you to play, laugh, and use your brain in fun ways to generate business. What's better than that?



* **Creative churn** is a condition where the idea generation goes on and on without purpose, direction or conclusion. It begins when the host or client dismisses the original ideas without adequate explanation. More ideas are generated and presented, again all ideas are discarded, and the principle of diminishing return sets in. Stop creative churn by putting two preventative measures in place: 1) the host and brainstorm facilitator must determine the **creative criteria** – how they'll select the best ideas with the participants – in advance of the brainstorm, and 2) additional brainstorms are not conducted until specific reasons are given by the host why the ideas are inferior. For more information, please refer to creative@work Issue 1 - *In Defense of Creativity*. (Website details below.)

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