

Brainstorming: In Search of an Idea

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Abstract—This article advises leaders of prospective brainstorming sessions how to achieve the synergistic effects they seek. To prepare for the session requires that the leader use two easel pads, with two people as recorders, marking pens, and masking tape (to display the ideas generated). Once the session starts, the leader should be prepared to (1) restate ideas for the recorders, (2) ask for clarification, and (3) overcome the inevitable lull. After generating as many alternatives as possible, the group is asked to evaluate the ideas by ranking, debating, and discussing. Abuses, misuses, and limitations on brainstorming are offered.

“GOOD flip-flop,” she said, rotating her hand encouragingly. Diane Heffner, training coordinator for Burroughs Wellcome Company, Research Triangle Park, North Carolina, paced in front of the crowd confidently. Behind her, two assistants scratched furiously on twin easel pads, struggling to keep up with the intense bursts of words fired from the audience.

They call it “brainstorming.” It’s an old idea but only recently have the techniques been honed into the fine-pointed discussion tool wielded by Diane Heffner and others like her. Brainstorming—also called “green-lighting”—is regarded as one of the most useful idea generators and one of the most successful discussion leading methods practiced today.

The purpose of brainstorming is to generate a large quantity of ideas in a very short time. You can do this yourself. Given a problem, a quiet room, and pad and pencil, you can quickly jot down all the possible solutions you can think of in a couple of minutes. But the greatest worth of brainstorming lies in its value as a group process. Brainstorming harnesses the creative powers of groups. People working together in a free-wheeling discussion often come up with ideas none of them could produce individually. This phenomenon (known as *synergy*) confirms the old adage “two heads are better than one.” Indeed, brainstorming has been used quite successfully with groups of up to 20 or 30, though eight to ten are usually preferred.

In addition to its synergistic effects, brainstorming, like other group processes, allows members of the group to help shape decisions, actions, and policies of the group or organization, which leads to greater commitment and motivation to achieve the goals of the group.

Brainstorming does, however, differ from traditional discussion techniques in one very important respect. It avoids the pitfall of premature evaluation, perhaps the greatest of all barriers to the creative flow of ideas. In a brainstorming session, the group produces as many ideas as possible as rapidly as possible, with no criticism or evaluation of any idea permitted until the discussion leader says so.

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PREPARATION

Being the leader of a brainstorming session is fun, easy, and productive. By following a few simple guidelines and with a little practice, you can put this remarkable discussion technique to work in solving the problems of your organization.

The first factor to consider is the facility—the office or meeting room in which the session will take place. It must be large enough to seat the group comfortably, preferably in a semicircle facing the discussion leader. This arrangement de-emphasizes differences in rank or status among group members, ensures good visibility for everyone, and focuses the attention of the group not only on the leader but also on the task.

To record the ideas of the group, you need at least one easel with a blank pad of paper. Ask for a volunteer to serve as recorder. You can do the writing yourself, but it’s best to leave yourself free to concentrate on the group, not the easel. Two easels are even better. Then you can use two recorders who can alternate writing the ideas generated by the group. At its productive peak, an active group will test the speed of even the fastest writer.

A chalkboard can be used if necessary but it’s a poor substitute for an easel pad in a brainstorming session. When it fills up, the flow of ideas screeches to a halt while the board is erased. Even if someone in the group is taking accurate minutes, the group can no longer see what has already been said, a critically important factor in brainstorming.

Another essential detail is masking tape. As the pages of the pads fill up, tear them off and tape them to the wall so everyone can see the ideas that have already been recorded. If you simply flip the pages or stack them out of sight, you’ll have people wondering, “Didn’t we think of that earlier?” To avoid stopping the discussion at a critical point, tear off a dozen or so three-inch strips of tape before the session and stick them temporarily to the edge of the easel or on the wall where the sheets will be displayed.

The matter of marking pens may seem a trivial detail but it can be embarrassing if you don’t have any. Use water color pens with broad felt tips. Some permanent inks leach through the paper, ruining several sheets beneath the one you’re writing on. Even worse, using the wrong pen on a sheet of paper that has been taped to the wall can leave ink spots on the wall.

In some cases you may want to talk to each participant individually before the meeting to explain the problem the group will be attempting to solve. In others you may want to kick off the meeting with a formal presentation complete with facts, figures, charts, graphs, etc. to make sure everyone understands the situation. Members of the group will want (and need) to know if they are deciding or merely recommending. If a course of action is adopted, who will implement it? As the leader, it’s your job to answer these questions before the brainstorming session begins.

By far the most important rule—and everyone in the group

must understand this—is the ban on evaluative remarks during the brainstorming session. All ideas, no matter how far-fetched, are accepted and recorded.

FREE SPEECH

Another rule is that in a brainstorming session, all participants must be treated as equals. Each individual must have a right to speak without fear of being put down. Perhaps one of the most difficult situations the leader will have to manage is when one person in the group has more knowledge of the problem than the rest of the group. Your task is to encourage input from the others in the group. If the ideas of the non-experts were not important, you wouldn't be having a brainstorming session. You would have given the problem to the expert in the first place.

The mechanics of processing the ideas should also be explained to the group. For example, they should understand that all ideas will be written on the easel, the pages will be taped to the wall, building on previous ideas is encouraged, contradictory ideas are encouraged, and even wild ideas are encouraged.

After you give the green light to the discussion and the group begins to spout ideas, you should restate each idea, trying to use the speaker's exact words. This lets the speaker know that not only the idea but also the means of expressing it is important. This encourages further participation. If the recorder does not write the speaker's words exactly, ask the recorder to rewrite the idea as originally stated unless the speaker prefers the revision.

You, as the leader, may ask for clarification if you do not understand what the speaker said. If you understand what he or she said but not what he or she meant, don't pursue it. The idea can be explained later during the evaluation session.

Your role is to facilitate the flow of ideas, and this means reinforcing participation in the discussion. You can do this with encouraging words ("OK," "good flip-flop," "good piggybacking," "un-huh," "now we're really clicking," "can anybody think of a variation on that idea?" etc.). Notice that the leader, in keeping with the rules, does not remark on the idea, but merely on the participation.

Body language is an important reinforcer, too. You can quickly shut down the discussion by raising your hand with the palm turned outward toward the group. You can encourage discussion by extending your arm toward the group with the palm up and the hand open. Generally, if you look open, relaxed, and receptive, the group responds better.

As the ideas continue to flow, the first page of the easel may fill up. Be aware of a natural tendency for discussion to stop when the page gets full. For some reason a full page creates the illusion that the job is finished. You can prevent this unnecessary break in the action by having an assistant quickly tear off the sheet and tape it to the wall. Meanwhile, the recorder should keep writing and the discussion should continue.

The essence of brainstorming is that one idea stimulates another. In fact, one idea may precipitate a whole family of related ideas. Some of these even have names, like "flip-flop" (opposite of a previous idea) or "piggyback" (logical extension of a previous idea). The human mind can interpolate, extrap-

olate, analyze, and synthesize. This sort of mental processing goes on all the time in a brainstorming session, which is why it's so important to keep all of those scribbled pages before the group. The first ideas are the raw materials, the feed-stock of the last ideas. And the last ideas are often the best.

For the same reasons, the wild, the funny, and the ridiculous have a place in the brainstorming process. They may sprout good offshoots. That crazy idea that at first drew chuckles may, upon analysis, turn out to be the best solution.

DECEIVING LULL

Sooner or later, the group will wind down. There will be an awkward period of silence when nobody is saying anything. An inexperienced discussion leader may end the brainstorming session here, believing that the group has reached a natural ending point. Not so. Remember that the group is still processing all the ideas that have been offered previously—combining them, breaking them apart, examining their contents and holding them up to the light. The patient, experienced discussion leader will outwait the lull, knowing the best is yet to come.

Perhaps a minute of silence will pass. Then the silence will be trampled under a new stampede of ideas. Other brief lulls will occur, and eventually the discussion leader will sense that the group has exhausted its options.

The next step is to evaluate the ideas on your lists. One way is to take each idea in order and let the group discuss what they like and don't like about each. Many will be discarded, some will be immediately attractive, and others will bear further investigation. Depending on the task, the group may select the best alternative or a group of alternatives.

Another approach is to ask each group member to select the idea he views as best, or to select the best five and rank them in order. This process will weed out the ideas favored by no one.

But these are simply different paths to the same destination. In each case the group must select the best idea (or ideas) and decide on a course of action or recommendation. Open debate and discussion of the pros and cons of the various ideas presented is the key to the evaluation process. It may produce consensus or there may be a dissenting minority. As the meeting leader, be prepared to deal with either.

THE RIGHT PEOPLE

Brainstorming is not a cure-all. There are situations in which it should not be used. A brainstorming session that includes the wrong people is not likely to produce satisfactory results. Clearly, the members of the group must have competence and experience that relate to the problem. Often, roles and functional responsibilities determine who will participate in the process. It is, for example, unlikely that the chairman of the board would call in his secretary to help select a site for a new manufacturing plant. On the other hand, it is not unusual to omit a key person from the brainstorming process—someone who has real expertise in the problem being discussed. Sometimes this occurs as a simple oversight, but often it occurs because the leader is unaware of the capabilities of the people in his organization. It's useful to know who knows what.

Another misuse of brainstorming—or of any process involving the input of ideas from people in the organization—is to give a false appearance of participation in the decision-making of the organization. If you (the leader) have already made the decision, you risk alienating your key people by involving them in a sham—a transparent one, at that.

A further limitation of brainstorming is that it is not a scientific method of problem analysis, though it may well be

used in conjunction with such methods. Quite the contrary, the value of brainstorming lies partly in its allowing us to suspend, temporarily, the rules of system and common sense. By permitting imagination to run free, brainstorming lets us step over the line of logic and fact and allows us a fresh view of our world. From that vantage point, we see things as we would never believe they could be, and, sometimes, things as they really are.