

BRAINSTORMING

By Jane Logan

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What is it?

Brainstorming is an uninhibited approach to generating ideas in a group, designed to produce a large quantity of ideas before a decision is discussed. It creates energy, involves the whole group and should stimulate creativity.

Why use it?

Brainstorming is highly participative and allows everyone to contribute and be part of a solution. One person's ideas can stimulate new thoughts in others, allowing the group to discover more data than if each participant worked alone.

How to use it?

1. The basic rules of brainstorming should be reviewed before you begin:
 - Let all ideas flow freely and postpone judgement or discussion. No debating!
 - Build on the ideas of others.
 - Encourage creative and new ideas.
 - Go for quantity at this stage, not quality.
 - There are no bad ideas.
 - Keep the energy up and the ideas flowing.
 - Everyone participates.
2. Make sure participants are clear on the topic, and have a few minutes to think quietly before you invite them to throw out ideas.
3. Record all ideas on a flip chart without discussion. Think fast, debate later.
4. If things slow down, keep pushing. Ask the group to build on an idea, or to look at the topic from a new perspective (sometimes customer, manager, supplier, competitor perspectives are helpful). Go around the room for more suggestions.



5. When the ideas have really dried up, brainstorming is over and the analysis begins. Clarify to make sure each idea is clearly understood. Group ideas and discuss them (at last!) Prioritize them to get consensus on the best ones.

Final thoughts

Brainstorming is probably the most common facilitation technique, but it is poorly executed when ideas are critiqued as they are generated. This cuts off the flow of new ideas and misdirects time and energy into evaluation. The beauty of brainstorming is that wild and crazy ideas can lead to the ultimate solution, by sparking the imagination in new directions.

If brainstorming is used so often it becomes stale with a particular group, participants can be challenged to go about it differently. Walk about brainstorming uses a series of flip charts or large paper posted on the walls. An idea related to the issue under review tops each paper, and the group circulates, building on ideas and adding new ones. To spark creativity when a group is stymied, facilitator Susan Freeman uses a “That’s Ridiculous” exercise where two or three far-fetched ideas are the starting point for a reality-based solution. For example, a group with a fund raising dilemma might start with “robbing a bank” and end up with “approach corporate sponsors”.

Suggested resources

www.brainstorming.co.uk

Ingrid Bens, Facilitating with Ease!, Participative Dynamics, 1997.

Susan E. Freeman, Effective facilitation tools: for everyone who leads meetings, discussion and other group activities (video recording); directed by Stephen Sealy and Matthew A. Keller. Careertrack Publications 1997.

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