

Brainstorming

What is a brainstorming?

Brainstorming makes it possible to quickly and, with a minimum effort, extend one's horizon to available experiences, ideas and opinions. For application in groups and in workshops, this method consists of collecting uncommented ideas or suggestions and is thus especially used at the beginning of (brief as well as comprehensive) experience capitalizations in order to gain an overview of the theme to be treated.

Brainstorming sessions are used for solving a process problem, inventing new products or product innovation, solving inter-group communication problems, improving customer service, budgeting exercises, project scheduling, etc.

What are meaningful steps in brainstorming sessions?

1. Introduce a question, problem, or theme both orally and in writing on chart paper. Set time limits.
2. Invite participants to respond with as many ideas or suggestions as possible, ideally in concise single words or short sentences.
3. Refuse any comment on participants' contributions. All ideas are equally valid.
4. Record each response on cards or chart paper.
5. Group ideas to reduce redundancy; allow for related ideas to be brought together. Ask "What is missing?".
6. Prioritize and analyze the results. Decide on further steps. Make participants feel the value added in a bigger context.

Key factors to successful brainstorming

There are numerous approaches to brainstorming, but whichever approach you use, there are several key factors which make the difference between a successful brainstorming session and a mediocre brainstorming session.

State your challenge correctly. In order to get the right ideas, you need to ensure that you are giving the brainstorm session participants the right challenge. Otherwise, you could end up with a lot of ideas which do not actually solve your problem. It is important to indicate very clearly the challenge in such a way as to indicate the kind of ideas you want, while not making the challenge so restricting that participants cannot get creative.

The most common problem is that the challenge is vaguely phrased. A manager who is looking for ideas on how to improve product X in order to make it more attractive to younger customers all too often phrases the challenge like this: "New product ideas" or "product improvements". Such vague challenges encourage vague ideas, many of which do not respond to the managers' needs.

No squelching! Squelching is when you criticise an idea or a person contributing the idea. Squelching can be obvious, such as "That's the dumbest idea I have ever heard!" or subtle, such as "you'd never get the budget to do that". No matter what the form, squelching does two terrible things

to a brainstorming session. Firstly, it makes the person who contributed the idea feel bad. As a result, she is unlikely to contribute any more ideas to the session. Even if her idea was not a good one, it is likely she would have had other, better ideas to contribute. Secondly, squelching tells other participants that unusual ideas are not welcome at this brainstorming session. Since most creative ideas are also unusual ideas, a single squelching effectively prevents participants from offering creative ideas. So, if you remember nothing else about brainstorming, remember: no squelching!

Mixed participants. When brainstorming works well, it is because the session taps into the combined creativity of all the participants. Clearly, then, the more varied the participants, the wider the range of creative thinking and the more creative the ideas generated. It is a common mistake for managers to think: we need marketing ideas, so let's get the marketing department together to brainstorm ideas. These people work together all the time, have similar backgrounds and know too much about marketing. As a result, their ideas will be limited in scope. Bringing together a dozen people from a dozen departments is a far better approach to generating a wide range of creative ideas.

Enthusiastic facilitator. The facilitator is the person who manages the brainstorming session. Normally, she does not contribute ideas, rather she makes note of the ideas, encourages participation, prevents squelching, watches the time and directs the session. A good facilitator will have a sense of humour and a knack for encouraging people to contribute ideas and be creative in their thinking. A good facilitator compliments ideas and gives high praise to the most outrageous ideas – that's because she knows that outrageous ideas encourage outrageous thinking which generates creative ideas. Moreover, what at first might seem a crazy idea may, on reflection, prove to be a very creative idea. Incidentally, if the facilitator is in the same company as the participants, care should be taken not to use a facilitator who is significantly higher in the corporate hierarchy. A high ranking moderator can make participants reluctant to take the risk of proposing an outrageous or highly unusual idea.

Good environment with no disturbances. An uncomfortable environment, an overly small room, mobile phone calls and secretaries calling their bosses out of the room for a moment all not only interrupt a brainstorming session, but also interrupt the continuity and thinking of participants. If you want an effective brainstorming session, you must insist participants turn off their telephones and inform their staff that they are not to be disturbed short of a total catastrophe. You should find a space that is large enough for the group and comfortable. A supply of water and coffee should be provided. Sometimes a little alcohol, such as wine or beer, can loosen people up and reduce inhibitions about proposing crazy ideas. Where possible, hold the brainstorming session outside your office, in a pleasant environment where participants are less likely to be disturbed or worry about their other work obligations.

Pitfalls

Not all Brainstorming sessions are effective. Many times these types of meetings suffer due to various factors, such as

- unclear objectives or ill-defined goals;
- disorganized or less-than-enthusiastic participation;
- failures in note taking;
- conflicts among team members;
- strong or overbearing personalities;
- "class system" in a pecking-order hierarchy;

- micro-management by various decision makers;
- “not invented here” (NIH) syndrome.

Having a defined and communicated plan or objective, having agreed-upon and enforced “meeting guidelines,” and knowing what kind of brainstorming techniques to use will make your creativity and decision making meetings more effective.

Variations of brainstorming procedures

An important rule of facilitation is: “The goal determines the methods”. This naturally applies to brainstorming as well. Sometimes time constraints are the most important consideration; sometimes the aim is an abundance of creative answers, and sometimes the social process. Depending on the situation, there are many variations of brainstorming that can be used to achieve the desired results in a short time.

In a “pure” brainstorming participants are invited to contribute as many ideas as possible. However, when planning brainstorming sessions, it is helpful to fix three variables deliberately for staying within the time limit and also limiting the number of cards. A brainstorming session should fulfil a purpose; depending on the goal, it may last for shorter or longer periods according to whether many or only a few ideas are collected. The three variables are:

X = Number of participants per brainstorming group (N = 1 ... 5)

Y = Number of minutes for thinking and writing

Z = Number of answers per group

Facilitator leads the brainstorming

Goal: To group a number of idea-cards in clusters.

Procedure: Ask a clear question. Give participants time to write their ideas on cards. Collect all cards, shuffle them, and with the support of the group form meaningful clusters.

Alternative procedure: Collect one first card, read it out and hang it on a pinboard. Ask for cards from other participants with same / similar content and form a first cluster. Collect a second card, etc. until all cards are clustered.

Participants group the cards

Goal: To group a large number of cards and simultaneously get participants to make contact with one another. This has the added advantage that participants become actively engaged and identify with the result.

Procedure: Plan the brainstorming session so that grouping will be required for several topics (e. g. for a party: bar, food service, entertainment, decorations). All participants write cards; then they divide into four groups. Each group receives a set of cards, groups them together on the pin board, and then presents the cards it has grouped in a plenary session. It is advisable for participants to put their initials on the cards they write in case they need to answer questions about them.

Checklist method

Goal: To make a comprehensive compilation of equivalent ideas in a short time.

Procedure: Participants write ideas on a piece of paper. Each participant specifies his/her most important idea, and the facilitator (or a secretary) writes these on a card or flip chart (in the form of a list or mind map). Other participants who have the same idea strike this idea from their list; only new ideas will thus be mentioned. The facilitator collects ideas until all the lists are exhausted or until a predetermined number of answers have been compiled.

The paper carousel

Goal: To collect as many creative ideas or suggestions as possible in a group.

Procedure: Each participant writes an idea in response to the question asked on a piece of paper, and passes it to the person on his/her right. The neighbour reads the idea and writes a second idea underneath it, and so on. Normally five to seven steps are sufficient before participants run out of creative ideas. Participants meet in groups of three with their pieces of paper and choose three to five of the best ideas from the total of approximately twenty ideas, and write these ideas on cards which the facilitator then collects. This method is limited by the fact that some ideas will not be explained and thus be eliminated hastily.

Autumn leaves

Goal: To have participants move about and develop plenty of creative ideas.

Procedure: Participants write while standing and strolling around the room, recording answers to a brainstorming question on cards, which they deposit in a visible place on the floor. Cards with related ideas are already combined while being arranged on the floor. Participants may be inspired to think of new ideas while reading the cards that have already been written.

Brainstorming in small groups

Goal: Participants exchange experience and opinions on selected ideas.

Procedure: Brainstorming takes place in groups of 3 – 5 participants. Participants give answers to a brainstorming question and exchange opinions. The revised answers are written on cards. This variation is a mixture of brainstorming and discussion that offers a chance to rank the ideas. It is a procedure that requires proportionately more time.

Poster Chat

Goal: To collect simultaneously ideas under several headings in a big group.

Procedure: The topic of interest is subdivided into six to twelve aspects (or: the topic seen from different perspectives). For each aspect, a brainstorming question is written on a chart paper. Participants move around and write their ideas, suggestions, and answers on the respective chart. After half to three quarters of an hour, at least 100 suggestions are made and documented.

Weighing or ranking of options

After numerous ideas have been collected in creative steps in a group, the ideas must be reduced to manageable proportions with which the group can work. Establishing priorities is the best method for doing this. The process of establishing priorities among many different ideas can already be initiated during brainstorming by using a suitable procedure such as forming discussion groups or limiting the number of cards per person.

Simple weighing

Brainstorming frequently results in a number of options. The task at this point is to select the options that the group considers most important. First, however, all participants must understand the available options, and they must be visible to everyone. The facilitator distributes stickers to each participant, taking care to see that each person has approximately one-third as many stickers as there are options. No clear majorities will become apparent if too many or too few stickers are distributed. It is also important for participants to be in clear agreement about how to apply the stickers: should ideas be evaluated in clusters or individually? Can only one or several points be attached to one option?

If stickers are not available, participants can also make marks with a felt pen. Using initials rather than ticks will prevent sly participants from giving undue weight to their preferred option.

Making rankings

Participants rank the options from 1 to X. This step can take place through discussion in a plenary session or as a group task where the group has to reach agreement. It is helpful to make a simple preliminary weighing in order to rank the options, which can then be examined in discussion and adjusted wherever the scores are the same.

Cherry-picking

Cherry-picking is appropriate as a follow-up to the “autumn leaves” or “paper carousel” method. Participants “pick cherries” from among the ideas they find on cards on the floor or from a list for further work.

Open or anonymous prioritisation?

With respect to some topics or in certain cultures, participants are fearful of expressing their opinions openly and prefer to assign points inconspicuously. To accommodate this situation, the pin board can be turned around, and each participant may then assign points privately, and thereby express an opinion or make an assessment. If this procedure really needs to be “top secret,” ballot boxes (large envelopes for each option) or paper ballots can be used, completed anonymously, and then collected and evaluated.

Delegation

Ranking can be delegated to decision makers or the responsible person, if the role of the brainstorming is to produce a lot of ideas only. Ideas thus may be submitted to an evaluation process with formal and transparent criteria. A process that is tiring to be done in bigger groups.

Variety in methods here as well

To get priorities, many other procedures are possible to imagine. When the expected result is clear, an appropriate method can be chosen. Here are several possible choices:

- Distribute the various options throughout the room. Participants choose their preferred option. Only these options are subsequently dealt with. When there are many participants and few options, this process is suitable for simultaneously forming working groups that will work further with these options; it should be possible to change the groups prior to beginning the work.
- Multi-step procedure: After each round of voting, the option (or options) with the least number of votes is eliminated.
- In large gatherings, subgroups dealing with a particular topic have the task of reaching a joint decision about their preferred idea.
- Participants evaluate options according to a list of criteria. When a parallel evaluation takes place in smaller groups, differing assessments must be discussed. This method is relatively transparent but very demanding.
- Project marketplace: Participants use play money to decide in which project they want to invest. Beans, coloured glass beads, pieces of cardboard or bricks can be used as play money.