

Brainstorming: Generating many radical and useful ideas

<http://www.mindtools.com/brainstm.html>

Brainstorming is a useful and popular tool that you can use to develop highly creative solutions to a problem. It is particularly helpful when you need to break out of stale, established patterns of thinking, so that you can develop new ways of looking at things. This can be when you need to develop new opportunities, where you want to improve the service that you offer, or when existing approaches just aren't giving you the results you want.

Used with your team, it helps you bring the experience of all team members into play during problem solving. This increases the richness of solutions explored (meaning that you can find better solutions to the problems you face, and make better decisions.) It can also help you get buy in from team members for the solution chosen - after all, they have helped create that solution.

Brainstorming and Lateral Thinking

Brainstorming is a lateral thinking process. It asks that people come up with ideas and thoughts that seem at first to be a bit shocking or crazy. You can then change and improve them into ideas that are useful, and often stunningly original.

During brainstorming sessions there should therefore be no criticism of ideas: You are trying to open up possibilities and break down wrong assumptions about the limits of the problem. Judgments and analysis at this stage will stunt idea generation.

Ideas should only be evaluated at the end of the brainstorming session - you can then explore solutions further using conventional approaches.

If your ideas begin to dry up, you can 'seed' the session with, for example, a random word (see Random Input).

Individual Brainstorming

When you brainstorm on your own you will tend to produce a wider range of ideas than with group brainstorming - you do not have to worry about other people's egos or opinions, and can therefore be more freely creative. You may not, however, develop ideas as effectively as you do not have the experience of a group to help you.

Group Brainstorming

Group brainstorming can be very effective as it uses the experience and creativity of all members of the group. When individual members reach their limit on an idea, another member's creativity and experience can take the idea to the next stage. Therefore, group brainstorming tends to develop ideas in more depth than individual brainstorming.

Brainstorming in a group can be risky for individuals. Valuable but strange suggestions may appear stupid at first sight. Because of such, you need to chair sessions tightly so

that uncreative people do not crush these ideas and leave group members feeling humiliated.

How to use tool:

To run a group brainstorming session effectively, do the following:

1. Define the problem you want solved clearly, and lay out any criteria to be met;
2. Keep the session focused on the problem;
3. Ensure that no one criticizes or evaluates ideas during the session. Criticism introduces an element of risk for group members when putting forward an idea. This stifles creativity and cripples the free running nature of a good brainstorming session;
4. Encourage an enthusiastic, uncritical attitude among members of the group. Try to get everyone to contribute and develop ideas, including the quietest members of the group;
5. Let people have fun brainstorming. Encourage them to come up with as many ideas as possible, from solidly practical ones to wildly impractical ones. Welcome creativity;
6. Ensure that no train of thought is followed for too long;
7. Encourage people to develop other people's ideas, or to use other ideas to create new ones ; and
8. Appoint one person to note down ideas that come out of the session. A good way of doing this is to use a flip chart. This should be studied and evaluated after the session.

Where possible, participants in the brainstorming process should come from as wide a range of disciplines as possible. This brings a broad range of experience to the session and helps to make it more creative.

And again, it's worth exploring the use of computer-based tools for group brainstorming. As long as you're reasonably quick with keyboard and mouse, these significantly improve the quality and effectiveness of a brainstorming session.

Key points:

Brainstorming is a great way of generating radical ideas. During the brainstorming process there is no criticism of ideas, as free rein is given to people's creativity (criticism and judgment cramp creativity.)

This often makes group brainstorming sessions enjoyable experiences, which are great for bringing team members together.

Individual brainstorming is best for generating many ideas, but tends to be less effective at developing them. Group brainstorming tends to develop fewer ideas, but takes each idea further. Group brainstorming needs formal rules for it to work smoothly.