



Brainstorming

JOHN BESSANT
Managing Innovation

Brainstorming

Brainstorming is a term originally developed by an advertising agency executive, Alex Osborn and subsequently described in his book '*Applied imagination*'. It involves the rapid pooling of all and any ideas that a group of people can come up with before any discussion or judgement takes place. Every idea is recorded no matter how bizarre or irrational.

How to Brainstorm

- *Keep a relaxed atmosphere.* Meetings should be disciplined but informal. If possible, choose an informal venue.
- *Get the right size of team.* The technique seems to work best with groups of 5 to 7 people.
- *Choose a process leader.* Their role is to manage the process and to check that everyone understands what is going on and why. In particular they have to watch that people don't jump into making judgments but rather listen and build on ideas – the key to successful brainstorming is to separate out idea generation from idea evaluation.
- *Define the problem clearly.* This can often be helped by having a separate problem 'owner' who explains his/her challenge and can be asked questions to help understand it better.
- *'How to'.. redefinition* Another option is to ask the participants first to come up with as many different definitions of the problem as they can – often framed in the form of 'how to ...' statements – and then select the one which best matches the issue to be explored. For example how to improve the speed with which train travel might be offered could result in several alternative 'how tos – how to avoid queues at the station, how to make the trains run faster, how to minimise delays due to signalling, etc. Each of these leads to a different set of ideas about solutions – for example, by focusing on the queuing question ideas about queue management might emerge whereas signalling delays might lead to novel ideas about different signalling approaches.
- *Generate as many ideas as possible.* In this stage the key is to listen to everyone's ideas rather than all shout at once, and to capture them as fast as possible – usually on a whiteboard although there are electronic variants. Freewheeling free flowing suggestion is the target without making any stops to judge, discuss or evaluate simply to surface the ideas however odd or crazy they might sound.

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- *Give everyone equal opportunity to contribute.* Part of the process leader role is to ensure this happens, by inviting or encouraging or even ‘turning down’ the volume on some of the more enthusiastic contributors!
 - *Write down EVERY idea* — clearly and where everyone can see them.
 - *When all the ideas are listed, review them for clarification,* making sure everyone understands each item. At this point you can eliminate duplications and remove ideas the group feels are no longer appropriate.

Some tips on the process

One of the important features of brainstorming is the idea of ‘incubation’ – sometimes people come up with ideas after letting them turn over in their mind for a while. There may be periods of silence followed by an upsurge of new ideas – let that process happen rather than stopping the session as soon as everyone appears to have dried up.

Similarly people may feel that they have ‘run dry’ of ideas – but by indicating that the session is about to close it is often possible to trigger another last surge – as if reaching for the doorknob prompts people to contribute one final rush of new thinking before the door closes.

Encourage humour and laughter and particularity highlight wild or crazy ideas – they are often the opportunity for someone else to ‘hitch-hike’ and develop a crazy idea into something which may have some novel potential.

Encourage people to build on each other’s ideas, perhaps by adding ‘yes, and ...’ statements to their interventions rather than the judgmental ‘yes, but...’ which implies evaluation

Deal with the problem of people rushing to discuss or judge by allowing them to put forward three ‘plus points’ for every negative, so they are reviewing the attributes and maintaining a positive frame of mind towards new ideas.

Try and encourage a supportive climate by briefing people before the session. The consultancy ?whatif! use a simple mantra – SUN and RAIN, where people are reminded that to foster new ideas they need to think about SUN – support, understand and nurture. And to avoid RAIN by trying to hold back on reacting instantly (rather than seeking to understand and explore new ideas), assuming (bringing their own assumptions rather than listening with an open mind to what the person is actually suggesting) and insisting (promoting and pushing their own ideas rather than hearing and working with other people’s suggestions).

Approaches to Brainstorming

There are many different variants of brainstorming including:

One-at-a-time

A member of the group offers one idea and the session continues this way until everyone has had a chance to add to the list. This is more disciplined and means everyone gets to contribute; if their turn comes and they have no new ideas to add it simply passes to the next person

Open Door or Freewheeling

Anyone who has a contribution speaks whenever he or she wants.

Nominal groups – write it down methods

Ideas are written down rather than stated out loud, but everyone must be able to see each idea listed. Here the problem of group dynamics with people feeling shy or inhibited or the group becoming dominated by a few loud and enthusiastic players can be dealt with by capturing ideas individually and then pooling them. They can be displayed and act as the stimulus for further idea generation or discussed and evaluated as before. A variation on this uses computer terminals to enable rapid individual idea generation and instant display.

Online/virtual community brainstorming

Building on the above idea the potential for accessing communities who are widely dispersed and engaging them in brainstorming across the Internet is now emerging.