Brainstorming: Worth A Second Look

Brainstorming—first used to generate advertising ideas—has been around for almost 70 years. Then, as now, organizations searching for new and creative solutions have used brainstorming to generate problem-solving ideas. Although some see it as a familiar, quick and inexpensive approach that encourages participation, others dismiss brainstorming as a tired, hackneyed waste of time. Been there; done that.

Have you ever been in a meeting where everyone spoke at once, where the agenda was unclear, where one or two individuals dominated the conversation, where your ideas were summarily dismissed or ridiculed—and when you faced a critical deadline to get the "real work" done back at your desk? Perhaps you or others called that meeting "brainstorming". Who needs it?

Done correctly, a brainstorming session would be the mirror opposite of the grueling, chaotic meeting described above. An impartial facilitator would ensure that each person spoke without interruption, that participants knew the agenda at least a day in advance, that no one dominated the meeting, that ideas were heard and recorded without comment—and that the brainstorming session contributed value to each participant's "real work".

Done correctly, a brainstorming session does not have to be a grueling, chaotic meeting.

Four commonly recognized types of brainstorming include:

- Unstructured
- Structured
- Silent
- Clustered

Unstructured brainstorming is what most people know. People contribute ideas as they come to mind in a non-judgmental atmosphere. The advantage of this approach is its simplicity. Bring people together, and let them rip. But some employees may fear repercussions from expressing their ideas or opinions when supervisors are present. Employees with introverted preferences—generally half the population—may not speak up unless they have had time to prepare. Conversely, extraverted employees—the other half—may consume most of the meeting. However, a well prepared, thoughtful facilitator can overcome these disadvantages.

Structured brainstorming—often used when teams are new to brainstorming—solicits one idea at a time from each participant. If a participant doesn't have a comment they may say "pass". When all participants say "pass", the session is over. One advantage is that it helps overcome inhibitions against participating. Structured brainstorming also prevents dominant participants from controlling the session. A disadvantage is that it sometimes inhibits the spontaneity expected of brainstorming.

Silent brainstorming is a sticky note approach in which each participant writes ideas on sticky notes or index cards posted in an area accessible to all participants for a day or more. Advantages include that it allows for anonymous contributions, small ad hoc discussions, and reflection time. Disadvantages are that silent brainstorming lacks the synergy of the open brainstorming session, inappropriate postings may go undetected, and the overall group misses the small ad hoc discussions.

Cluster brainstorming is done by writing the topic in the center of a blank sheet of paper and then quickly generating and writing down any thoughts that come to mind. You circle each thought. You then draw arrows between circles when you see connections. Its advantage is that it lets groups work with words in a non-linear, pictorial way. It's a quick and fun approach. Cluster brainstorming can also work well for an individual working alone to compose a written product or prepare a presentation.

The four methods sound simple enough, so why are we sometimes reluctant to brainstorm?

First, humans like to judge—a key to the appeal of reality television programs such as *Survivor* or *American Idol*. Each day, we routinely judge and decide. So while suspending judgment is critical to an effective brainstorming session, it's enormously challenging for people. In fact, under stress to solve a problem, we might tend to be even more judgmental. Despite the facilitator's best efforts, brainstorming participants often silently judge and evaluate. This internal editing can inhibit some ideas—the ones that got away, that you later wish you had said. A second round of brainstorming can be useful to get at these ideas.

Second, many of us prefer specificity and closure—just do it; get it done. By precisely defining the problem, we think we can limit brainstorming to save time. While this can be true when you're attempting to generate solutions from a known universe of potential solutions, it's less true when you're trying to come up with new approaches to situations. When tenants in a new high rise office building complained about the wait time for arriving elevators, engineers at first puzzled over expensive and unlikely possible solutions to speed up the elevators. However, at least one engineer thought about how boring it is to wait for the elevator. The inexpensive solution—to install full length mirrors on the walls around the elevator—dramatically reduced the number of complaints. People were no longer bored because they enjoyed looking at their reflections.

Third, some of us know everything and the rest of us know what we know. Not recognizing our heuristic biases—what we know, how we each see the world—can limit brainstorming's effectiveness. People's responses to problem solving may be shaded by how the problem is described or "framed" when the session begins. Dealing effectively with the biases of representativeness, framing, and anchoring are necessary for an open session with unfettered creativity.

Fourth, group fatigue may set in. We all know the signs—heads bowed to hands text-messaging, glazed eyes, exchanged glances, sidebar whispers, sleepy nods and fidgets. Lethargy, boredom and distraction are the last conditions conducive to effective brainstorming. Taking a break or having a snack can be helpful. Even better are breathing, movement and relaxation techniques that we have found to be effective in energizing individuals and groups.

In truth, when it comes to brainstorming, many have not really "been there or done that" correctly or effectively. With a little planning and practice, any team will benefit from this tool for generating ideas and solutions. Contact us for other ideas on how to make your team activities more effective.

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