

# How to do Traditional Brainstorming

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First we will explain how to be a participant in a brainstorming session and then we will give you pointers on how to organize one yourself.

Many people find it easier to be a participant first, before they run a session, but if you and your colleagues approach learning with a flexible attitude then you should have no problems in running one straight off (but perhaps you should practice on a non-vital topic first to gain experience).

**Brainstorming** is "a conference technique by which a group attempts to find a solution for a specific problem by amassing all the ideas spontaneously by its members" - Alex Osborn.

## How To Brainstorm In A Medium-Sized Group

Gather a group of between four and fifteen people together in one room. Have a central person to coordinate the proceedings, introduce the purpose of the brainstorming session and to outline the rules. This person should also ensure the rules are followed and should actively encourage the participants. This person is the facilitator (facilitate = to make easier).

With the purpose and topic established, everyone in the group shouts out their ideas and they are all written down so that they can be analyzed later. The most common method of recording the ideas is on flipcharts (large pads of paper) but it's fine to use a blackboard, overhead projector transparencies, a computer or individual pads of paper. A secretary or dedicated writer can be useful and for larger groups you may need two or three to ensure all ideas are captured.

You should all follow the standard brainstorming rules:

- Postpone and withhold your judgment of ideas
- Encourage wild and exaggerated ideas
- Quantity counts at this stage, not quality
- Build on the ideas put forward by others
- Every person and every idea has equal worth

It is essential that you encourage wild ideas from other people and do not criticize them. Not only does it reduce inhibitions in others but it also reduces **your** inhibitions because you can only put forward your own alternative ideas in a receptive environment.

You should record your ideas, however "irrelevant" or "silly" they seem to be. Your initial idea may not work but it may spark off a valid idea in someone else.

Your role as a participant is twofold:

1. To suggest ideas which will work as solutions
2. To suggest ideas which will stimulate solutions in others

Since you cannot presume what will stimulate solutions in others, it is your duty to provide them with as many original stimuli as possible, whatever they may be.

You will find that the brainstorming session will go through phases of very rapid idea generation, and then through slow awkward times when no ideas are being created. This slow time is when you should return to the ideas which have already been generated and build on them.

You should now know the basics of what happens in a brainstorming session. It is a group of people who free themselves from social inhibitions to generate as many ideas as possible so that

original solutions are free to surface. Your role is to say whatever ideas you think of, whether they seem to be relevant or not. You won't be criticized because that's what you are supposed to be doing.

## **Rules of Brainstorming**

### **Rule 1: Postpone and withhold your judgment of ideas**

Do not pass judgment on ideas until the completion of the brainstorming session. Do not suggest that an idea won't work or that it has negative side-effects. All ideas are potentially good so don't judge them until afterwards. At this stage, avoid discussing the ideas at all, as this will inevitably involve either criticizing or complimenting them. Ideas should be put forward both as solutions and also as a basis to spark off solutions. Even seemingly foolish ideas can spark off better ones. Therefore do not judge the ideas until after the brainstorming process. Note down all ideas. There is no such thing as a bad idea. The evaluation of ideas takes up valuable brain power which should be devoted to the creation of ideas. Maximize your brainstorming session by only spending time generating new ideas.

### **Rule 2: Encourage wild and exaggerated ideas**

It's much easier to tame a wild idea than it is to think of an immediately valid one in the first place. The 'wilder' the idea the better. Shout out bizarre and unworkable ideas to see what they spark off. No idea is too ridiculous. State any outlandish ideas. Exaggerate ideas to the extreme. Use creative thinking techniques and tools to start your thinking from a fresh direction.

### **Rule 3: Quantity counts at this stage, not quality**

Go for quantity of ideas at this point; narrow down the list later. All activities should be geared towards extracting as many ideas as possible in a given period. The more creative ideas a person or a group has to choose from, the better. If the number of ideas at the end of the session is very large, there is a greater chance of finding a really good idea. Keep each idea short, do not describe it in detail - just capture its essence. Brief clarifications can be requested. Think fast, reflect later.

### **Rule 4: Build on the ideas put forward by others**

Build and expand on the ideas of others. Try and add extra thoughts to each idea. Use other people's ideas as inspiration for your own. Creative people are also good listeners. Combine several of the suggested ideas to explore new possibilities. It's just as valuable to be able to adapt and improve other people's ideas as it is to generate the initial idea that sets off new trains of thought.

### **Rule 5: Every person and every idea has equal worth**

Every person has a valid viewpoint and a unique perspective on the situation and solution. We want to know yours. In a brainstorming session you can always put forward ideas purely to spark off other people and not just as a final solution. Please participate, even if you need to write your ideas on a piece of paper and hand it out. Encourage participation from everyone. Each idea presented belongs to the group, not to the person who said it. It is the group's responsibility and an indication of its ability to brainstorm if all participants feel able to contribute freely and confidently.