

Brainstorming can work for your company

Based on the issues that will be considered later in this article, here is a check list for effective brainstorming.

Select a broad and diverse group

A good size for a brainstorming group is between 6 and 12 people.

Diversity is the key to choosing a group who are likely to come up with the breakthrough ideas. It is this diversity that also enables you to draw on the wisdom that is embedded in your organisation.

Draw the people from as many different parts of the organisation as is practical and with as many different disciplines and experiences as possible. Call on people who are outside of the immediate group.

Do not be afraid to include other departments who may have little direct experience or expertise in the problem area. In this way you will draw on the full depth of the corporate wisdom of your organisation.

Broaden the team's perspectives by stimulating creativity

To overcome the limitations of both clichéd and procedural thinking it is necessary to stimulate the brainstorming team's "creative juices".

Do this with a "warm up" brainstorm but choose a frivolous problem and spend ten minutes or so brainstorming crazy solutions. The crazier the better. This will help the team breakout of the old perspectives, but more than that, in this process they will stimulate each other's thinking with "outside" ideas. External provocation such as this is also a key to jumping tracks and changing perspective.

The result will be a team that has begun to change perspectives as their creative juices have been switched on. They will be ready to find new ways of addressing the problem at hand.

Align the team and the problem

It is important to align the team's appreciation of the problem. This has two benefits; namely clarifying and refining the problem statement and ensuring that the team is pulling in the same direction. There are a number of ways to do this but a straightforward way is as follows :

First, get the team to review the key words in the problem statement. Some starter questions for this are:

- Why were those words used?
- What is the root issue?
- What is the impact of the issue?

Then, in the light of this review, have the team restate the problem using different words. This will capture the shared understanding that the team has developed and enable each member of the team to own the problem that they are about to brainstorm. It will also challenge the problem statement and help to ensure that the correct problem is being addressed.

Keep the session on track

Your job as facilitator is to lead the team through the brainstorming process and help them keep on track. The three simple rules are:

- Keep focused on the topic in hand.
- Allow only one conversation at a time
- Criticism and assessment of ideas is not allowed during the brainstorm. That process comes later.

The object is to create new ideas

The more ideas the better. No idea is without value as it may stimulate the vital idea that solves the problem.

- Piggy-backing is allowed. Build on or adapt other's ideas.
- Wild and Wacky ideas are welcome. The least they do is stimulate others and they may be the "intermediate impossibility" that leads directly to the solution.

Consider boosting the session's effectiveness by combining techniques

- Consider using enhanced brainstorming techniques to multiply the number of ideas that are generated and to dig deeper into the group's creative wisdom.
- Use techniques such as SCAMPER to focus the brainstorm.
- Use techniques such as Object Forcing and Random Words to reignite the team's creativity if the session dries up.

Apply the best and most novel ideas, this is the essence of innovation

- Rationalise and refine ideas that are similar
- Develop the intermediate impossibilities into practical solutions.
- Identify and test ideas and solutions for viability.
- If some aspect of the solution or organisational behaviour blocks implementation treat that issue as the subject of another problem solving brainstorm.
- Plan and execute the realisation of the solution. This turns great ideas into innovation.

Take a problem or challenge that you face and try it out, even if you think you have the solution. Do not discount the Lazy Brain and the effect of our minds being pattern generation and matching system overlaid with procedural thinking. Find ways to change your perspectives and stimulate your creativity to find those intermediate impossibilities that lead to something completely new.

So there we are. The challenge for you is to go out and give it a go. Read on to learn more about the techniques that will enhance the effectiveness of brainstorming.

1.) How brainstorming can harness your company's talent

This article will introduce you to the top tips that will enable you to run effective brainstorming sessions.

Selecting the group

The beauty of brainstorming is that it involves the creative thinking of many people who stimulate each other to come up with new ideas. It is the chemistry of stimulating new ideas that is important when it comes to selecting the team.

The question is "What team make up will be most likely to generate the ideas that create a breakthrough?"

A natural response is to gather together those who know something about the matter or perhaps those who are responsible for managing the situation. Building a brainstorming team on these and similar criteria alone is often setting up the session to be a disappointment. One reason for this is that such a group is likely to have similar outlooks and experience which will tend to limit the group's ability to stimulate that novelty which leads to breakthrough.

Diversity

Diversity is the key to choosing a group of people who are likely to come up with breakthrough ideas. It is this diversity that also enables you to draw on the wisdom that is embedded in your organisation.

It is diversity of outlook that will form the foundation on which you can build in order to stimulate the creation of novel and useful ideas. Plainly, some matters may require technical expertise but even then do your best to create a diverse group. Don't be afraid to call on people from outside the immediate group involved. Be brave enough to call on someone who doesn't have the technical background and expertise, you probably have a room full of them anyway. Why? Well it's about stimulating a change of perspectives because it is a change of perspectives that enables the group, as a whole, to think in new ways and come up with new ideas.

Diversity introduces different perspectives and allows others to stimulate different thinking in the group and it is different thinking that leads to breakthroughs.

Setting up the team

The tip for creating an effective brainstorming team is to draw the people from as many different parts of the organisation as is practical with as many different disciplines and experiences as possible. Call on people who are outside of the immediate group. A brainstorming session works best with between 6 and 12 people so there is room for diversity.

Do not be afraid to include other departments who may have little direct experience or expertise in the problem area. In this way you will draw on the full depth of the corporate wisdom of your organisation. What can you do to prepare? Get to know more about your colleagues and their different backgrounds and experiences, and then you will be ready to call on them when you need a brainstorming team.

Having assembled the team, the next thing to do is to look at some of the factors that inhibit our ability to generate new thinking and consider some of the things that can be done to overcome them.

2.) How to make brainstorming a creative process

Here we learn about some of the things that prevent the generation of breakthrough thinking and what you can do about it.

The Lazy Brain

Even a diverse team alone will not guarantee good brainstorming results. There is more to changing perspectives than simply including people with a range of experiences. The problem is how our minds work. We have to deal with what is sometimes called the "Lazy Brain". This makes it hard for us to find breakthrough solutions because our minds tend to think in the same old ways and from the same old perspectives. This happens in two ways: patterning and procedural thinking.

Patterning

Our minds are terrific at generating patterns out of situations and information and then recognising those patterns again. Just think for a moment about the difficulty of recognising a face in a crowd. Recognising a face in isolation is no mean feat let alone when it is surrounded by tens or even hundreds of others.

Our minds do this with situations too. This means that, without being fully aware of it, we force fit new situations to previous situations for which we have a pattern in our minds. You may think "But that is experience, isn't that good?" Well, when it comes to problem solving the answer is "No, not always".

Why? Because this not only limits our horizons when it comes to generating ideas but it also affects how we see and therefore define the problem. It may only be similar to but not the same as problems we met before. That means that the solutions we used before are probably not the best ones to use this time.

The result is that we force fit old solutions to new problems and end up with something that does not work. This happens because our perspective of the problem is wrong and the solution is not appropriate to the actual problem at hand. This is a major cause of solutions that do not work as expected and problems that seem not to go away. For obvious reasons this whole process been called "Cliché Thinking".

Procedural thinking

The second major obstacle is that our minds think procedurally. We learn to do things in particular ways using favoured approaches and methods. It is how we are taught to think and most times it stands us in good stead. However, it does slant the way we approach problems and challenges. This procedural-type thinking will dictate how we analyse problems and try to find solutions. It forces us down the same old routes, obscures the best solutions and negates creativity, limiting our ability for breakthrough thinking.

There are ways to overcome both of these "Lazy Brain" issues. The need is to change perspectives and jump track by switching on, what a friend calls, "the creative juices". How can we do this? There are a number of ways, some we will look at in a later part of this article. When the creative juices flow people begin to change perspectives and look at things in different ways. New and different connections are made with seemingly unrelated ideas and situations, creating the environment in which breakthrough thinking emerges.

Stimulating a creative outlook

How can you stimulate the creative juices in a brainstorming group so as to generate new thinking?

One way, and there are others, is to run a brief "warm up" brainstorm for the group. Choose a frivolous problem and spend ten minutes or so brainstorming crazy solutions. The crazier the better. This will help the team breakout of the old perspectives, but more than that, in this process they will stimulate each other's thinking with "outside" ideas. External provocation such as this is also a key to jumping tracks and changing perspective.

The result will be a team that has begun to change perspectives as their creative juices have been switched on. They will be ready to find new ways of addressing the problem at hand. The warm up also has another beneficial effect. The team will have practiced and become used to the rules of brainstorming which we will be explored later in this guide. Before that, it is necessary to ensure that team members have a common view of the issue or challenge to be addressed.

3.) How to align the brainstorming team around the same problem

We will now look at the issue of understanding the problem.

What is the problem?

For any brainstorming session to be effective it has to have something to work with, the problem statement. That statement needs to be the appropriate problem statement and the team needs to have a common understanding of it.

Earlier we looked at two significant aspects of the Lazy Brain, patterning and procedural thinking. Both of these affect how we see and understand the problem. Given that these two aspects affect us all in individually unique ways, dependent upon our experience, it is likely that the team will not naturally have a shared understanding of the issue at hand.

Aligning the team

Your next step in setting up the brainstorming session is to align the team's appreciation of the problem. This has two aspects; namely having the right problem statement and ensuring that the team's understanding of it is the same.

Both aspects can be addressed at the same time by having the group spend 10 minutes or so reviewing and probing the problem statement. Problem Stretching is one of the many methods available for exploring the problem statement and identifying if it is actually dealing with the root issue for the reasons we discussed above.

Another simple and straightforward method is for you to lead the team in a review of the key words in the problem statement and for the problem owner to answer the questions put to him. Some starter questions are:

- Why were those words used?
- What is the root issue?
- What is the impact of the issue?

Finally, in the light of this review, have the team restate the problem using different words. This will capture the shared understanding that the team has developed through the review and enable each member of the team to own the problem that they are about to brainstorm.

If left to run free, the brainstorming process can quickly destroy the alignment and ownership that has developed and can cause the creative juices to quickly dry up. The role of the facilitator is important and the brainstorm must be run in line with some simple rules.

4.) How to keep the brainstorming session on track

We will now look at the issue of keeping the brainstorming session on track.

The problem is people!

The problem with meetings that involve people, and that is all of them, is the people. We have this habit of going off at tangents, of missing the point, of being critical, of getting upset or angry and generally managing to de-rail meetings. The only way around this is to have leader who leads the meeting and to adhere to certain protocols that foster the smooth running of the meeting. Brainstorming is no different.

The Facilitator

The leader of the brainstorming session is the facilitator. Their goal is to enable the team members to generate ideas and keep the meeting on track. They are the one who pulls the team together and guides them through the processes stage by stage, and the person who lists the ideas as they are generated, guiding the team to stay within the boundaries of the brainstorming rules. This means that they will not have time to contribute to the generation of ideas because they will be too busy.

As the facilitator you must be careful when you intervene to keep things on track so that you do not crush the creative spirit that you have worked hard to stimulate in the first place.

Brainstorming rules

There are six rules for a brainstorming meeting. Here we deal with the three that are about keeping the meeting on track and, as the meeting facilitator, you must take control of the meeting and lead the team members accordingly. The first step of which is, of course, to review the rules. The warm up brainstorm not only stimulates creative thinking but gets everyone used to adhering to the rules.

Focus, focus, focus

Any meeting that does not remain focused will fail to achieve its objective. However, brainstorming has an additional impediment in that it is intended to come at things from different directions. Each member throws up new ideas that trigger new thoughts and responses from the other participants. Because this must be allowed to happen it is fertile ground and it becomes easy for the brainstorm to go off in the wrong direction.

The facilitator must watch for this and pull the group back on course without suppressing the team's creative flow. Like a good soccer referee you will need to learn when to let the game flow and when to blow the whistle. Let ideas flow but when the group has gone off at a tangent, gently bring them back on course along the lines of "I think we may have gone off course here, let me just read out the problem statement again to refocus us."

One conversation at a time

In such a free-flowing environment it is all too easy for the meeting to disintegrate into more than one concurrent conversation. This means that the ideas in one conversation cannot stimulate the whole group and the facilitator will also miss ideas and so not be able to note them down. Maintaining the discipline of one conversation at a time is vital to successful brainstorming.

Criticism free zone

The moment that negative criticism or the fear of it enters a brainstorming meeting then the creative juices dry up and with them the flow of ideas will come to a halt. The brainstorming stage of the process is about generating ideas regardless of how "off the wall" or silly they may seem. Critical comments that put others down have no place in a brainstorming session.

An idea may seem silly and impractical and will later be discounted but, it also has another value. It has the power to stimulate in others, the idea that may give rise to the solution. In a football match the player who feeds the ball to the striker who then scores the winning goal is as valuable the striker. The assist is vital to the successful outcome of the game. So it is with seemingly valueless ideas in brainstorming.

There is also another value of seemingly silly ideas; they may be what are sometimes called an "intermediate impossibility". Not sensible in their own right but can be developed into innovative and practical solutions. We look at this in more detail in the next session.

It is important that you do not allow the brainstorming stage begin to evaluate the ideas. That comes afterwards. Also it is important to remind the team to avoid negative criticism if it begins to occur, encourage anyone who may have been its target. Their ideas are valuable.

These are three rules that keep the brainstorming session on track, delivering new ideas. Next we will look at three rules that are concerned with the generation of the ideas themselves.

5.) How to brainstorm new ideas

We will now look at the three rules that are concerned with creating ideas.

a.) The more the merrier

One of the criticisms of brainstorming is that it generates a high volume of useless ideas, but this is to miss the point and misunderstand the process. In brainstorming the process is about creativity not final application and the quality of the session should be measured by creativity not by any initial impression concerning practicality.

The whole process is rather like panning for gold. The pan starts out with a lot of alluvial gravel and the process leaves a few specks of gold. The brainstorming session itself is about harnessing the collective wisdom and creativity of a group of people to put the gravel in the pan. The evaluation stage, which comes after the brainstorm is about panning to find the nuggets of gold.

More than this, an idea which proves otherwise to be "useless" has another, perhaps more important value. It may be the thing that stimulates the vital idea from another person that brings success.

Volume is a by-product of fertile creativity and is not to be feared, rather it is to be encouraged. Evaluation and filtering come later. So, as the facilitator, do all you can to encourage creativity and volume of ideas.

b.) Piggy-backing is encouraged

We live in age of innovation when Intellectual Property is highly valued. Plagiarism and theft of ideas is justifiably condemned. However, brainstorming must be seen as a collective endeavour with joint ownership of the outcome. This means that adding to, or adapting the ideas that emerge from others in the session is both valid and essential to the process. So one team member is allowed to piggy-back their idea on that of another team member.

If it came to a patent application then all members of the brainstorming session that generated the patentable idea have contributed and would be attributed. As the facilitator encourage the participants to piggy-back, that is to build on each other's ideas.

c.) Wild and wacky is welcome

There is a concept in creative thinking called the intermediate impossibility. This is an idea that is wacky and not implementable but which can be adapted to a valid and viable solution. Sometimes, for the reasons discussed earlier, it is not possible for the brainstormers to move directly to an idea that is real solution. The intermediate impossibility is the alternate route, the diversion that leads to the solution.

The essence of the craziest expression of an idea might be transformed into the practical solution that is sought. For this reason it is not possible to declare that any idea that emerges from a brainstorming session is valueless. It is the reason why creative thinking is encouraged and why the wild and wacky is welcome.

In a brainstorming session no idea, as long as it has relevance to the problem (stay focused) has less merit than any other idea. The goal is to find new ideas, to generate breakthrough thinking and it is the wild and wacky ideas that may stimulate the novel innovation that leads to fortune. As the facilitator, you will need to encourage the wild and wacky.

This section has looked at the rules that guide the stimulation of new ideas. In the next section we learn about some ways that will enable you to further enhance the effectiveness of brainstorming.

6.) How to boost brainstorming's effectiveness

We learned about establishing the environment that enables brainstorming to be effective. Here you learn about some ways of significantly enhancing its effectiveness.

Enhanced brainstorming

Standard brainstorming normally involves a group of people meeting in a room and in turn speaking out an idea that relates to solving a problem or addressing a challenge. By stimulating the creative juices, as already discussed, it is possible for the brainstormers to adopt new perspectives and generate new thinking and novel ideas. The whole process enables each member to be stimulated by the ideas of

others. However, because of its very nature, in an open setting the reaction and response to the ideas of another can tend towards the superficial.

An enhanced brainstorming technique called "Plussing" can generate a deeper response to the ideas of others. This method forces the stimulation and interaction into a more intimate mode. Plussing is so called because its essence is to add to the ideas of others in a sequential, one-on-one process. It is a variant of a technique called Brain Writing.

Each team member writes down their first idea on a sheet of paper and then passes the paper to their neighbour, everyone passing in the same direction. They then ponder the idea on the sheet of paper passed to them and write down an idea in response and pass the paper on. Do this for 20 or 30 minutes.

Plussing has two key benefits: Standard brainstorming has people calling out their ideas one at a time in turn, whereas Plussing generates multiple ideas each turn. Plussing is a silent and semi-private method which enables the more timid members of the group to contribute as effectively as the rest. It also avoids some of the meeting control issues that may arise in standard brainstorming as we discussed earlier.

Combining techniques

There are various tools that you can introduce that are designed to stimulate and focus creative thinking that can also be used in a brainstorming session. For instance there is a tool called SCAMPER, which is an acronym for a list of questions that can be asked about a product, service or process; for instance: S = Is there anything that I can Substitute? C = Can I Combine it with something else? A = Can I Adapt something to it? M = Can I Modify it in some way?

Each of these questions can be the subject of a mini brainstorming session aimed at identifying new products or services. Combining techniques in this way can be very productive and it helps maintain focus.

Stimulating the creative juices when things dry up

Even when you as the facilitator have done all you can to stimulate creative thinking and guide the group to effective brainstorming things can dry up. There are a few techniques that can help you relight the creative fire. They can also be used to guide and stimulate the brainstorming process in general.

One is the "Random Word" technique where a random word is used as seed for new ideas and another is "Object Forcing". Here an object is forced into the problem and must be used to achieve the solution. Most times this generates intermediate impossibilities but if the object is the basis of association it may trigger more direct ideas.

We have looked at how to set up and run a productive brainstorming event but as we noted earlier, after the ideas are generated they must be evaluated and those with merit must be pursued. This is the subject of the next section.

7.) How brainstorming leads to innovation

We learned how to set up and run an effective brainstorming session that generates creative ideas. For the brainstorming process to be truly effective those ideas must be evaluated, rationalised assessed for

viability and implemented. Here you learn what to do with the ideas that your brainstorming team has generated.

Creative thinking is about generating novel ideas while innovation is about making them happen. If brainstorming is about creative thinking then this stage is about innovation and it is here that organisational resistance can obstruct progress.

Evaluation and assessment of the generated ideas normally needs a different mindset to that required to create them. For this reason it is often best if you adjourn at the completion of the brainstorm and gather the team at another time to evaluate and rationalise the ideas and begin the planning actions. Evaluation must also involve the problem owner and may require the involvement of subject matter expertise. Some prefer that the problem owner makes the running from here on.

Rationalise similar ideas

Having collected the ideas, each need to be reviewed and then collated. As facilitator, lead the team to collate ideas based on similarity, i.e. ideas which are similar to each other are collected together. Then synthesise single solutions from each set.

Develop the "intermediate impossibilities"

Perhaps the most interesting ideas are those which of themselves are "way out" and impossible to implement directly. They are sometimes called "intermediate impossibilities", however, they can lead to the most interesting, practical and innovative solutions.

As the facilitator, now lead the team to identify the core ideas in the intermediate impossibility. Then seek to translate them into practical solutions. It is unlikely that these solutions would have occurred to anyone by any other way. To help you identify the core ideas ask basic questions about the idea e.g.

What, why, when, how, where, who.

Identify the viable

From the solutions that have emerged each must be assessed for viability. What that means will depend upon the nature of the problem and the solution. It may require some investigation before the viability of a solution can be assessed. It is at this point that expertise may be required, but be careful because expertise is based upon experience and experience leads to cliché thinking. That is why innovation can be crushed right here. As the facilitator you will need to champion the process and the most promising ideas and potential solutions.

It may also be that an attractive idea is disqualified because the organisation cannot cope with it. That may be the end of the matter; however, if it is simply an issue of process and procedure, these can be changed and adapted. If a solution has significant merit then it will be appropriate to work out how the organisation can adapt to make the solution possible. This may require the whole brainstorming process to run again but this time the problem in view will be how the organisation can adapt.

It may be that a new problem with the solution emerges, e.g. it costs too much. Use the process to address that as issue.

Planning and execution

Once an innovative and viable solution is devised use the ordinary business processes of planning and management to ensure that the chosen solution is implemented. Without this then the whole process will have been pointless. If this happens, however, it will not have been the brainstorming stage that was at fault.

In this section we have looked at how to use brainstorming to generate new ideas and how to put those ideas into practice. The next step is to try it out on an existing problem and start to build your experience.

Summary

In the current climate, companies should look at anything that may give them a competitive edge. Using the skills, experience and knowledge that already exist in the company makes good business sense. There is no additional cost and there may be some pleasant surprises when seemingly uncreative staff come up with some company changing ideas. Brainstorming is one method of harnessing all of the creative capacity in a business and it could be the difference between success and failure.