

BRAINSTORMING & INNOVATION

Nearly everyone engaged in innovative endeavors has come across the need for brainstorming. In precipitous economic times, businesses and organizations have to be very creative to survive and thrive as the business paradigm changes around them. For this reason, it is worth revisiting the value of brainstorming, and some of the techniques that are utilized in successful brainstorming sessions. Adventure in Innovation™ places a high value on brainstorming, and features a dedicated portion of its website to the activity and techniques.

Brainstorming is a popular method of group interaction in both educational and business settings. Although it does not appear to provide a measurable advantage in creative output, brainstorming is an enjoyable exercise that is typically well received by participants. Newer variations of brainstorming seek to overcome barriers like production blocking and may well prove superior to the original technique. How well these newer methods work, and whether or not they should still be classified as brainstorming, are questions that require further research before they can be answered.

There are four basic rules in brainstorming. These are intended to reduce the social inhibitions that occur in groups and therefore stimulate the generation of new ideas. The expected result is a dynamic synergy that will dramatically increase the creativity of the group.

1. Focus on quantity: This rule is a means of enhancing divergent production, aiming to facilitate problem solving through the maxim, quantity breeds quality. The assumption is that the greater the number of ideas generated, the greater the chance of producing a radical and effective solution.

2. No criticism: It is often emphasized that in group brainstorming, criticism should be put 'on hold'. Instead of immediately stating what might be wrong with an idea, the participants focus on extending or adding to it, reserving criticism for a later 'critical stage' of the process. By suspending judgment, one creates a supportive atmosphere where participants feel free to generate unusual ideas.

3. Unusual ideas are welcome: To get a good and long list of ideas, unusual ideas are welcomed. They may open new ways of thinking and provide better solutions than regular ideas. They can be generated by looking from another perspective or setting aside assumptions.

4. Combine and improve ideas: Good ideas can be combined to form a single very good idea, as suggested by the slogan "1+1=3". This approach is assumed to lead to better and more complete ideas than merely generating new ideas alone. It is believed to stimulate the building of ideas by a process of association.

To run a brainstorming session effectively, do the following:

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- Define the problem you want solved clearly, and lay out any criteria to be met.
- Keep the session focused on the problem.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- Ensure that no train of thought is followed for too long.
- Encourage people to develop other people's ideas, or to use other ideas to create new ones.
- 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.

Undoubtedly brainstorming is not an end in itself. A goal has to be in mind at the onset (although it should be put to the back of one's mind for true creativity to flourish during the actual brainstorming session). Be aware that brainstorming about one problem or concept might serendipitously generate unrelated ideas that have a lot of potential value. ■