

# Brainstorming: a Problem-solving Tool

## What is it?

A useful tool used for generating ideas relating to particular issues.

## What to use it for

Generating lists of:

- topics for data collection
- potential solutions
- items to monitor
- creative ways of solving a particular problem

Brainstorming is often used in the work environment or as part of your programme where you may want to generate multiple ideas and make use of a group. Although many groups rarely undertake brainstorming effectively, if you follow the 'rules' below, you will find it can prove very effective indeed.

## Points to remember

- Agree a time limit for brainstorming.
- Each person takes a turn to offer an idea, but initially must only offer an idea when it is their turn. Between turns, each person can write down her/his idea so as not to forget it.
- Any idea is acceptable, even if it seems wild, crazy, silly, strange or similar to a previous idea. Some of the best ideas are simply variations on what somebody else just said.
- When your turn comes around and you don't have an idea, simply say 'pass'; any remaining ideas can be added once the individual process has been completed.
- Never criticise, question or even praise others' ideas during the brainstorming session.

## Useful information

**By suspending comment, group members can relax and offer ideas freely.**

Brainstorming serves two purposes. It produces a wealth of ideas about the subject at hand, and it strengthens your group's ability to work co-operatively. Strong, co-operative teams are key to your success, and brainstorming is an effective tool for building such teams.

Brainstorming was developed in the 1950s by an advertising executive named Alex Osborne. It's based on one simple idea: the principle of deferred judgement. Osborne noticed that people were reluctant to offer ideas when they feared criticism. He suggested that a group completely refrain from comment while members are trying to be creative. By suspending comment, group members can relax and offer ideas freely. The process is enjoyable and energising. People

suggest original and even far-out ideas, some of which may prove useful later. What's more important, though, is that one idea stimulates another, so that the group ends up with a large number and variety of ideas.

The first step in problem solving is to use brainstorming to create a rich list of problems. The items in the list will later be whittled down to a single problem that everybody can work on and solve.

Brainstorming can be used in any situation where a group wants to stimulate abundant ideas about an issue.

## Procedure

### How to use it

The steps of brainstorming are simple:

**Step 1** Decide on a topic (such as 'problem ideas' or 'ideas for solutions').

**Step 2** Ask each member in turn to offer an idea about the topic. Other members should refrain from any comment, listen carefully, and build on each other's ideas.

**Step 3** Ask one person to record all the ideas on a flipchart.

**Step 4** Continue the process until the team feels it has exhausted its ideas on the topic.

**Step 5** Discuss and clarify the ideas on the list.

Brainstorming employs several key assumptions. First, the leader's role is not to dominate but to keep the process moving smoothly and to encourage everybody's active involvement. Second, all team members are equal; everyone's contribution is needed and valued. Third, it takes time for everyone to become comfortable with brainstorming. Some members may plunge in eagerly, while others may hold back at first. This makes it all the more important to create an atmosphere of acceptance for all ideas. Finally, while brainstorming can be fun and exciting, it's a means to a serious end. It provides your team with raw materials – your list of ideas.

## Guidelines for team leaders

**Always end a brainstorming session when people begin taking a long time to come up with ideas.**

When you lead a brainstorming session, the following guidelines will help keep ideas flowing in an orderly way:

1. **Be sure that everyone is clear about the topic for the brainstorming session.** When generating problems, start by defining the topic broadly; for example, 'work- related problems in our department'. Later, the focus may become narrower, such as 'problems with misinformation in our office' or 'defects on the fourth assembly line'. In other sessions, the topic may be entirely different; for example, you may be looking for solutions.

2. **Move quickly from one person to the next, asking every person in turn for an idea.** Brainstorming generates energy in the group – members become involved because it's something like a game. If the leader allows things to slow down, this energy can be lost. When people have to offer ideas quickly, they tend to reveal what's on their minds without stopping to evaluate. This is the goal of brainstorming.
3. **Welcome all new ideas.** Sometimes even the strangest or most obvious ideas offered in brainstorming sessions prove valuable later on. But these ideas are apt to be withheld if members are worried about being evaluated.
4. **Be encouraging.** The leader sets the tone for the session. You can be encouraging without being evaluative. Generate enthusiasm through your tone of voice, your energy, and the phrases you use. For example, instead of saying nothing when it's somebody's turn, you might say, 'OK, Joe, give us your idea about this'.
5. **Don't allow questions, criticism, or praise during the session.** 'No evaluation' means more than just refraining from criticism. It also means 'no comments of any kind' about the ideas. Even positive comments can inhibit some people, who may think, 'If the group likes X's idea, they may think that my idea isn't very good'.
6. **Don't allow outsiders who could inhibit the group to attend the session.** You want people to feel free to say what they think. The presence of non-team members can sometimes be inhibiting, especially when a group is just beginning.
7. **Elicit ideas from others; keep your own contributions to a minimum.** You want to keep things moving. You can slow down the process with lengthy comments of your own; keep them short and keep the emphasis on the team members and their ideas.
8. **Set a time limit; we suggest roughly 10–30 minutes, depending on the topic and the size of your team.** People usually work faster and harder when they know their time is limited. Although even a session as brief as three minutes can be very productive, a group will usually want more time than that to offer its ideas. Regardless of the time limit, however, always end a brainstorming session when people begin taking a long time to come up with ideas. This is usually a sign that the group has nearly exhausted its store of ideas for that session.
9. **After creating your list of ideas, allow time for discussion and clarification of the ideas.** People may want to explain their ideas more fully or to combine or eliminate some ideas. It's vital at this point that everyone clearly understands what each idea means.

## Brainstorm guidelines for team members

If you are a team member involved in a brainstorming session, the following guidelines will help keep ideas flowing in an orderly way:

1. **Offer ideas only when it's your turn.** This ensures that everybody will get a chance to speak.
2. **Any idea is acceptable, even if it seems silly, strange, or similar to a previous idea.** In fact, some of the best ideas are simply variations on what somebody else just said. Don't censor yourself. Even if your idea won't work, it may make someone else think of a great idea.
3. **State your ideas briefly and clearly.** Other people will appreciate you for it, and your idea is likely to get a more sympathetic hearing.

4. **Say 'pass' if you don't have an idea when it's your turn.** Make brainstorming enjoyable for yourself. You needn't be intimidated.
5. **Never criticise, question or even praise other members' ideas.** Any kind of evaluation can be intimidating – even praise. You can evaluate later. Avoid it for now.

## For the recorder

The recorder's job is to write each idea on a flip chart. As a recorder, you can either inhibit or encourage new ideas. For example, if a member has a very long idea, you must condense and reword it so that it will fit on the flip chart. If the member disagrees with the way it's written, he or she may feel misunderstood and stop participating. So, when you rephrase a statement, check with the person who offered it to make sure it's what was intended.

Your job is also to create a record of the team's work. Team members will want to save their brainstorming lists so they can look at them again for the next problem selection. Therefore, write neatly and accurately, date each page, and be sure that the pages are kept on file.