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Brainstorming

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What is it?

Brainstorming is the general term used for idea generation or coming up with lots of new ideas. Within a brainstorming session you can incorporate some of the other tools that are described in this section (such as **Fresh eyes** and **That's impossible!**).

When to use it

Brainstorming can be used at any time when new solutions to an identified problem are required. To help avoid making 'knee jerk reactions' to issues, try doing a quick brainstorming exercise to help achieve a better solution. Brainstorming can be used in normal meetings and doesn't need anything complex or special to be effective.

How to use it

The most important thing to make a brainstorming exercise effective is to stick to the five key rules of brainstorming:

1. **Criticism is ruled out** – there are no bad ideas at this point
2. **Go for quantity** – don't settle for three or four ideas – aim for 10 to 20
3. **Encourage wild ideas** – they often provide breakthrough insights
4. **Build on the ideas of others** – what can you add? What other ideas does it bring to mind?
5. **One conversation at a time**

When planning and running a brainstorming session:

- It helps if you have access to the right kit: flip charts, sticky notes and pens.
- Think about whether you have the right people in the room; if key people are missing you can still carry on but you need to make sure to include them later on.
- Define the purpose of the brainstorming session – what is the problem or opportunity? Write up a statement describing it, but be careful not to infer a solution within the problem statement as this will hinder the effectiveness of the idea generation.
- Brainstorming is an active exercise, so encourage people to stand up, shift position and move around. People should call out ideas spontaneously with no discussion at this stage. Encourage 100% participation. Speed is important and people should not get bogged down.
- Get everybody's ideas down on paper as they are called out. Sticky notes are great for this as they can be sorted and grouped later on. Go for quantity, you should aim for at least 20–30 ideas in five minutes.

Nominate someone to keep an eye on the time and make sure the rules are obeyed. This person should also try to ensure that participants feel comfortable and join in.

When working with a larger group, consider:

- Planning specific sessions to work on particular issues
- Having a brief warm up on an unrelated, fun topic. This will get the creative juices flowing and help establish a less restrictive mood. Start the main topic when the right mood has been established
- Allowing time afterwards to go through the ideas generated
- Displaying the five rules of brainstorming as a reference and reminder for all
- Encouraging people to have ideas by using different tools. Remember that giving people permission to freewheel doesn't necessarily mean they feel able to do it. They need to be encouraged by using different tools and techniques within the brainstorming session.

If a solution has already been pre-determined or if you already have several solutions and you want to decide which one to use, use a different approach (such as **bullet proofing**, or **Six Thinking Hats®**).

What next?

Agree what to do with the ideas your group has generated. There are many different techniques to help you do this. One of the simplest and most effective is 'dot voting' where everyone has a specific number of dots to select their favourite ideas against different criteria. Other tools that can help are **bullet proofing**, **Six Thinking Hats®** or **affinity diagrams**.

It may also be useful to agree to test out several ideas if appropriate. The best way to do this is to do some rapid small scale tests of change, as a way of deciding where to focus your efforts. See plan, do, study, act (**PDSA**).

You can use brainstorming at any stage of a project or meeting. It is possible to generate a lot of ideas in a really short time.

Additional resources

Osborn, A (1942) *How to "Think Up"*, McGraw-Hill: New York

Background

Alex Osborn invented the technique of brainstorming. It was developed further during the 1940s and 1950s. The psychologist J.P. Guilford identified five key traits in creative behaviour:

- Fluency – the ability to generate many ideas in a set time.
- Flexibility – to rapidly free associate.
- Originality – to express uncommon ideas.
- Awareness – to see beyond the immediate facts.
- Drive – the willingness to try without fear of failure.

Osborn sought to develop a method to bring out these five traits in everyone.