

Brainstorming Techniques

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Now that "doing more with less" is the universal business mantra, managers are scrambling to develop the innovative capacity of their teams. If you are looking to increase your team's creative output here's a review of a classic technique and an introduction to some strategies you may not have tried before.

Linus Pauling once said: "If you want great ideas, you need to have lots of ideas."

Brainstorming is the most popular technique for producing lots of ideas. But, although it is widely practiced, it is seldom utilized to its full potential. If your group uses brainstorming, check to be sure these fundamentals are in place:

1. Start with a warm-up exercise - especially if the group doesn't brainstorm frequently or when the group seems distracted by outside issues. Use word games or puzzles or humor to set an atmosphere that is relaxed, fun and freewheeling.
2. Encourage everyone to participate, either with original ideas or "piggybacking" (adding on to) other people's input.
3. Focus initially on quantity, not quality of ideas. Write all ideas on a white board or large sheets of paper and number them to help motivate participants and to jump back and forth between ideas without losing track of where you are.
4. Urge participants to say anything that occurs to them, no matter how wild or "far out" those ideas may seem.
5. Realize that brainstorming sessions tend to follow a series of steep energy curves. When the momentum starts to plateau, the facilitator needs to build on what's been stated ("That's a great idea; now what are some other ways to _____?") or to jump to another point ("Let's switch gears and consider _____.")

Ideally, the brainstorming session should be broken into two parts: the first for idea generation and the second for evaluation. During the idea generation phase, no one should be allowed to judge, criticize, or squelch any of the ideas presented.

- ◆ Stay alert for nonproductive comments such as, "We tried that last year," "I don't think that will work," etc.
- ◆ Counter premature judgment with, "This isn't the time for evaluation yet."

And, as effective as brainstorming can be, remember there are many other collaborative techniques that stimulate creativity. Here are just a few:

Metaphorical thinking is a great tool for breaking out of current patterns of perception. By comparing your situation to another more well-understood system or process you may spot similarities and come up with an unexpected idea. The exercise asks: What can I learn from this comparison?

Forced connections is a technique for finding commonalities between two or more seemingly unrelated concepts or items. One practical exercise is to examine an industry that is very different from yours and look for things you can successfully imitate. Another is to bring "show and tell" items that help you visualize the wide variety of options and materials that could be applied to the session's topic.

Back to the future starts with an image of the completed goal. Team members compare their answers to a series of questions: What does the ideal end result look like? How is the ideal different from what we have now? What changes are necessary for us to achieve the ideal? How

can we make those changes?

Get visual. The most productive creative-thinking sessions are extremely visual. They include mind mapping, sketching, diagrams, cartoons and stick figures. Images stimulate emotion. Emotion opens creative channels that pure logic can't budge.

Get physical. Get up and move around. Have your team stand rather than sit when grouping around white boards or easels. Act out the problem you are working on. A popular technique used by design firms is "bodystorming" where people act out current behavior and usage patterns to see how they might be altered.

Get fired. My favorite way to end a creativity session is to ask participants to take the last few minutes and contribute ideas that would probably work, but are so outrageous they could get the group fired. (Obviously, the task then becomes to tone-down the potential solutions so that the problem can be solved without risking any jobs.)

And, of course, you want to make sure that you are trying to solve the right problem. The European operation of a business started losing money after many years of outstanding profitability. Worried, the management team initially discussed ways to reduce costs in Europe in order to improve profitability. When the cost-cutting did little to stop the downward slide, the team finally faced the real issue: the geographical distribution of customers had changed drastically. The problem was then redefined as "How do we serve our customers more profitably on a global basis?" Hundreds of ideas were generated around this challenge that resulted in a customer focused business restructuring that not only cut costs in Europe but also added resources in other parts of the world.

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