

Checklist - Conducting a Brainstorming Session

I. Preparation

A. Select the problem or opportunity to be brainstormed. Select an item important enough to justify the participation of others. It should also be one where there are a number of possible solutions and imagination is required to think of them.

B. Think of structure, aims and objectives. Although a brainstorming session is an open, *no-holds-barred* affair, establish where you are going, what you want to achieve and roughly how to get there.

C. Choose the Facilitator: He/She should be an open, outgoing person with enthusiasm and ability, contributing interest and enjoyment. Choosing the right facilitator is vital. The facilitator need not be the most senior person at the session, but will need to set the scene by relaxing the participants and creating an open, free atmosphere, controlling dominant people, getting and keeping them on track by highlighting the issues, and creating a sense of fun. Most importantly, the facilitator should be adept at keeping ideas flowing.

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| he/she has | 1. Should the facilitator be internal or external? An external facilitator can be especially useful when senior managers are involved, but if the issue is not too complex or contentious, an internal facilitator may be used provided some experience. |
| or
group | 2. The facilitator should feel comfortable running activity-based sessions and should have clear plans and tactics for arriving at expected outcomes targets. The facilitator must also ensure, as much as possible, that the works as a team and owns what it has achieved at the end. |

D. Select an appropriate venue. This depends largely on the time set aside for the session. If time is available then somewhere away from the routine place of work is often more suitable. This gets people away from the office atmosphere and is often better for a fresh perspective on the business in hand.

E. Think of the group mix. Include personnel who have little or no knowledge of the problem to be brainstormed. They will not be concerned with detail and will offer a fresh approach. Consider the introduction of outsiders for this, although it can backfire if they are seen as intruders or spies. Work on getting the group dynamics right for putting the group at ease. Discourage put-down comments and creating a “free-from-blame” atmosphere.

F. Think of the right number. There is no right number, although more than 10 might be unmanageable when ideas really start to flow, and less than five might not be enough for generating creativity. Six to eight is usually about right, although this will depend on the style of the facilitator and the nature of the problem to be considered.

G. Get the equipment right. You will need to record the ideas that come up. A tape-recorder may well act as an inhibitor to the free flow of ideas. You might try a flip-chart with plenty of sheets and plenty of marker pens.

H. Get the layout right. Do not use a room with fixed rows of seats. Something more relaxed is preferable; a circle or U-shape is fairly usual. If the facilitator is not familiar with the room to be used, he/she should check it beforehand and prepare it appropriately.

I. Get the timing right. Think of your own powers of concentration and remember that brainstorming of ideas can go from dynamic to exhausted, and back again. Ten to twenty minutes may be needed to get people relaxed; two hours can be a long time to brainstorm--stop for a break if people show signs of tiredness. Arrange for a 20-minute break after an hour's uninterrupted flow, or if and when the flow slows to a trickle. The break may be enough to stimulate an active re-start, perhaps with a change in seating of individuals.

J. Get the time of day right. Some people are better when their mind is less active and more relaxed and when their routine work has been dispensed with. Others may prefer the morning when collective mental energy is at its highest, or at least not dulled by working all day. Provide sufficient notice of the session, and an outline of the problem to be discussed.

II. The Session

A. State the problem or objective. Explain it to the group. Make sure everyone participating has a clear understanding.

B. Restate the problem. Encourage the group to *stand back* from the problem and see it from every angle. Suggest re-wording it into *how to* type statements. Some restatements may be close to the original, others may illuminate new facets. Jot down the restatements on the flip-chart for all to see.

C. Brainstorm the problem with the following guidelines:

- work
1. Discourage judgment: avoid evaluative comments such as *that won't* or *that sounds silly*.
 2. Use the following techniques for generating further ideas.
 - a. Call for a one-minute break, asking the group to look over ideas already noted before starting the flow again.
 - b. Reflect and concentrate on one idea, *e.g.* how many ways can we do this?
 - c. Look back at the statements to pursue other lines.

- d. Encourage (within limits) drifting or day dreaming; try to bring the subconscious into play..
- e. Go for quantity not quality; evaluation comes later.
- f. Pick up somebody's idea and suggest others to expound on it.
- g. Ask the group to choose a really wild and apparently senseless idea from the lists marked up and generate ideas from there

D. Closure: give a warning of when the session will close about five minutes from the end. The participants will want to know what happens next. Explain that the lists will be typed up for circulation. Do this within 24 hours to retain freshness and familiarity. Tell the participants that they will be informed on the ideas chosen for further action or recommendation. Ask them one last time for any comments, ideas or further thinking. Evaluation does not matter at this stage as the ideas will already be gathered; evaluation comes next.

III. Evaluation

A. Get the team to scrutinize all the ideas to pick out any instant winners. Use a process of ranking with 3 points for those which stand out, 2 points for those which have possibilities but need a little adjustment, and Zero for those which now appear over the top, require clearly too much resource, or do not meet the original objectives.

B. Reduce the number of 2 pointers to a minimum by applying such criteria as cost, acceptability or time-scales

C. Use reverse brainstorming

- 1. In how many ways can a particular idea fail?
- 2. What are the negative factors?
- 3. What is the potential downside for the organization?

D. Apply the key evaluative criteria

- 1. What will it cost?
- 2. Will it be acceptable to management, staff, customers?
- 3. Is it legal?
- 4. Is it practical?
- 5. How long will it take?
- 6. What competition will there be?

7. How urgent is it? (If it is not done now, will an opportunity be lost?)

IV. Dos and Don'ts for Brainstorming

A. Do:

1. Be sensitive to participants' fatigue.
2. Encourage freedom of movement; some people think better when mobile.
3. Use a variety of techniques to generate further ideas.
4. Encourage an informal atmosphere free from blame or inhibition.

B. Don't:

1. Let the session go on too long
2. Allow interruptions.
3. Use a tape-recorder
4. Allow critical or judgmental comments.
5. Allow the session to become too "off-the-wall."