



The Complete Guide to Managing
**Traditional Brainstorming
Events**

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Note: This step by step report is written in British English. Apologies to users of other variations of English for any resulting inconvenience.

Introduction

Traditional brainstorming can be a highly effective technique for maximising a group's creative potential in order to generate ideas and determine which ideas are most likely to succeed. But, if poorly organised, brainstorming can also be an expensive waste of time. This step by step report will explain in detail how to organise and run effective brainstorming sessions as well as how to evaluate the results.

First, it is critical to clarify what we mean by brainstorming. The term is widely used to refer to any idea generation technique. However, this report will describe traditional group brainstorming and evaluation methodology. We will explain how to organise, run and follow up on a traditional brainstorming session as well as provide tips that will ensure your brainstorming sessions are effective.

Each step is important. Skipping out on steps, such as evaluation, will provide incomplete results. Since a brainstorming session will comprise up to a dozen of your employees, this can be an expensive mistake. If all steps are performed properly, however, brainstorming is a very powerful tool for innovation.

Why it works

Brainstorming taps into the collective creative power of a group of people. Any group of people will, of course, have a wider range of experience and knowledge than any individual within the group. This is particularly true when participants come from a variety of backgrounds.

The relaxed environment of a brainstorming session combined with the “no squelching rule” (see below), makes participants comfortable about coming up with crazy ideas; ideas they might keep to themselves in more formal situations. Moreover, ideas inspire more ideas. Creative ideas inspire more creative ideas. People build upon each other's ideas. The result is a rich list of ideas some of which are obvious, some of which are so crazy they could never be implemented and some of which are real gems that could lead to new products, new services or new ways of doing business.

Traditional brainstorming is not just about generating ideas. It is about tapping into the cumulative creativity of a group of people, generating ideas and then evaluating those ideas to find the best ideas.

Good humour

There is a very good chance your brainstorm session will be full of laughter and crazy ideas. This is to be encouraged. Laughter and joking ease people's inhibitions making them more likely to come up with more creative ideas. And, as Albert Einstein once said: “If at first the idea is not absurd, then there is no hope for it.” No one denies his creative genius!

The issue

Any brainstorming session starts with the issue for which you will seek ideas. The issue will normally be in the form of a goal. It may be the solution to a problem, for example: “we need to cut operational costs by 10% to avoid bankruptcy;” or it may be a general goal such as: “ways to make the dining facilities more appealing to our hotel guests.”

*The **issue** is what you will brainstorm about. It should describe a need, a goal or a problem.*

The issue should be clear, concise and indicate the kind of solutions you want. Many brainstorming session organisers are overly concise. For example, the issue: “Slogan” may clearly indicate to you, as the organiser, that you want ideas for a new company slogan. That might not be so clear to participants.

An issue which explains the need, such as: “We need a new slogan that better represent our new corporate direction,” clearly indicates the kind of ideas you require. Even “we need a new slogan” is better than simply “slogan”

Likewise it is important not to be overly restrictive in stating the issue. Doing so may diminish the quality of the ideas. The issue: “We need a new slogan which emphasises that we are Europe's leading supplier of prefabricated houses and which demonstrates our dedication to after-sales service” is likely to limit ideas as brainstormers struggle to find ideas which meet all the demands of such an issue.

Since the initial period of the brainstorm session comprises open ideation, the issue should leave room for creativity and wild ideas. Even if those wild ideas are not used, they will inspire less wild and more workable ideas. Thus, a looser issue is better than a tighter one.

***Ideation** is the process of generating creative ideas.*

Evaluation criteria

Once you have determined the issue, the next step is to review the issue and decide by what criteria you should judge the ideas generated during the session. The criteria should reflect the intended implementation of the ideas and the needs of your organisation. For example, if you are brainstorming new product ideas, criteria are likely to include:

- strong profit potential
- low cost to develop and produce product
- good fit with existing product line
- speed of bringing to market

Ideas will be evaluated by each criterion, so it is important to choose criteria that allow ranking on a sliding scale. For example, “can we launch this product by the end of the year?” is a poor criterion as it takes a yes or no answer. On the other hand: “ease of launching product by end of the year;” or “speed of bringing to market (ideally before end of year)” are better criteria.

Criteria may sometimes reflect lack of negative attributes, such as

- Freedom from legal liability issues
- Unlikely to take sales from existing products

In our experience, five is an optimal number of criteria for evaluating ideas. Five criteria enables a detailed evaluation within a reasonable time frame. Nevertheless, a few criteria more or less are acceptable.

If you wish to have the brainstormers participate in defining the evaluation criteria, this should be done after the ideation period of the brainstorming session (see below).

Choosing the right evaluation criteria is essential for a successful brainstorming session.

In our experience, five criteria are optimal for evaluating ideas.

The team

An ideal brainstorming team should comprise one **moderator** and eight to twelve **brainstormers**. Sessions with fewer brainstormers will work, but are unlikely to have the energy or generate the breadth of ideas of more populated sessions. More than a dozen brainstormers, on the other hand, generally results in a core group monopolising the session, while quieter, less extroverted brainstormers remain quiet. As a result, their ideas are lost.

If you wish to brainstorm with larger groups, we recommend breaking the groups up into smaller teams of 8-12 brainstormers and running simultaneous sessions. See section on “Simultaneous sessions” below.

If you are running a brainstorm session via a web application, such as Sylvia Web Brainstorming, it is possible to have many more participants. The web application will allow multiple simultaneous idea submissions and prevents individuals or groups from dominating the session. See section on “On-line brainstorming” below.

Moderator

The moderator manages the brainstorming session itself. She starts the session, writes ideas generated, stops the session at the appropriate time and manages the evaluation. The moderator does not participate in generating of ideas. Ideally she will encourage brainstormers with positive feedback, laughing at crazy ideas and preventing squelching (see below).

A moderator should be an enthusiastic person with a sense of humour and the ability to control the brainstorming session. An intimidating boss would be the worst possible choice as she would doubtless intimidate brainstormers, which would lead to poor results. A popular secretary, on the other hand, can be an excellent choice.

Brainstormers

The brainstormers should comprise a cross section of the organisation if the session is for a single organisation. If the session includes people from numerous organisations, then a variety of backgrounds is necessary for optimal results.

For example, if your firm is brainstorming new marketing strategies, including only marketing people in the

*The **moderator** manages the session. She introduces the issue, notes down ideas, answers questions and manages the evaluation.*

*The **brainstormers** generate ideas and participate in the evaluation of their ideas after the brainstorming session.*

brainstorming session would be a critical mistake. Your marketing people work together every day, probably come from similar academic backgrounds and know each other well. As a result, they will all have similar ideas that are not overly different from your current marketing strategy.

A better, more effective approach would be to include people from marketing, sales, research and development, human resources, finance, and other departments together with someone from your advertising agency and a customer or two. Do not be afraid to bring in people with totally irrelevant backgrounds. An administrative assistant in the accounting department may not have marketing training, but she does have her own experiences and knowledge and is likely to have some original ideas that the marketing people would never have.

It is also good to include one or two creative bright sparks: (in other words, creative thinkers who are constantly coming up with new ideas). Their participation will motivate others to contribute ideas; their crazy ideas will push other brainstormers to think up more radical ideas.

When possible, avoid overly negative people and intimidating people. They will only discourage other participants from sharing their more original or radical ideas.

The most effective brainstorming teams will include people from a variety of departments and backgrounds. Similar people think similarly to each other. Different people think differently from each other. If you want a variety of ideas, go for a variety of people.



Preparation

Preparations for a brainstorming session are minimal. You need to prepare a space for the session as well as invite the brainstormers. When booking the space and informing the brainstormers, bear in mind that a brainstorming session should take about 15 minutes of introduction, 30-40 minutes for ideation, 30 minutes for evaluation and discussion and 15 minutes for conclusions. So, plan for a minimum of 90 minutes; two hours would be safer. If you are running multiple simultaneous sessions (see below) allow another 30-60 minutes for organising teams and compiling results.

If you are not moderating the brainstorming session yourself, you should begin by meeting with your designated moderator. Explain the session, explain her responsibilities and let her take over the management of the session.

It is often effective to inform the brainstormers of the issue to be brainstormed with as little advance warning as possible. This will have then entering the session with fresh minds unprejudiced by pre-planning. Thanks to busy schedules, it is often necessary to set up brainstorming sessions many days or even weeks in advance. In this case, you should inform the participants only of the general nature of the brainstorming session when setting the appointment. You can tell them the issue itself at the beginning of the meeting.

This is in fact an approach we have taken when organising international brainstorming sessions with participants from numerous organisations. And it has proven effective. Forewarning of the general nature of the brainstorming session has allowed brainstormers to research and prepare themselves for the topic, but prevented them from working on ideas in advance..

It is important to stress, at the invitation stage, that certain things will not be tolerated during the brainstorming session:

1. No bringing prepared ideas into the meeting! All ideas must be spontaneous.
2. No mobile phones or leaving the meeting for any reason short of global catastrophe! Interruptions, such as mobile phone conversations, people leaving the meeting for a few moments and the like seriously disrupt the flow of the

Checklist

- ✓ *Allow about two hours for a brainstorming session.*
- ✓ *Make sure there is a whiteboard, flip-chart or similar writing tool available.*
- ✓ *Ensure the meeting will not be interrupted.*

meeting and lead to poor results. Remind participants that they and others are contributing valuable time to the brainstorming session. Interruptions waste that time.

3. No late arrivals! A brainstorm session cannot start until all are present.

Finally, if meetings in your organisation are generally formal, remind participants that brainstorming should be a relaxed affair.



Good preparations lead to good results.

The Space

The brainstorming session can be held in any space that is reasonably comfortable, prevents disruption and has a means of writing ideas where everyone can see them. In most organisations, this space will be a conference room and it will do admirably.

The only requirement is a whiteboard, flip-chart or computer and beamer that will allow the moderator to write ideas as they are suggested. Coffee, water and other drinks are a nice touch that help relax participants.

Potential distractions, such as telephones, should be removed or disconnected.

It goes without saying that the meeting room should be reserved well in advance to prevent any last minute problems. Brainstorming session time spent looking for a meeting room is time wasted.

Getting away from the work place can have a powerful positive effect on brainstorming. Running sessions in public parks, in bungalows in the woods and in other natural environments can give everyone a real sense of getting away from the office and coming to a refreshing environment, which leads to fresh thinking.

Likewise, sessions in hotel meeting rooms, in private rooms in restaurants and even on trains can provide a fresh environment to inspire fresh ideas. As long as a session can be held uninterrupted and the moderator can note down ideas, the choice of brainstorming space should be limited only by your imagination.

Any meeting or conference room will suffice, provided there will be no distractions.

However, brainstorming in alternative locations can be inspiring

The Session

It is essential that all brainstormers be present at the start of the session. If one or more brainstormers is late, you must either wait for them to arrive before beginning or prohibit their participation entirely. Likewise, no one other than the moderator and the brainstormers should be present during the session. Observers will probably inhibit the brainstormers and dilute their creativity.

Likewise, interruptions cannot be tolerated as they will spoil the flow and energy of the brainstorming session. Insist that all present switch off their telephones, that the telephone leading into the space is disconnected and that assistants, receptionists and others understand that they are not to disturb the session for any reason short of an emergency.

Once everyone arrives, you may begin. The brainstorming session itself comprises several components. We shall go through each of them below.

Introduction

The introduction should begin with your introducing the issue and explaining its importance. You should also write the issue at the top of the whiteboard (or whatever writing space you opt to use – we will use the term “whiteboard” throughout this report).

You should explain that once the session has begun, everyone is expected to shout out ideas while you (or the moderator) write them on the whiteboard. Point out that all ideas, no matter how crazy, undoable or irrelevant they may be, must be heard and will be written down. Remind participants that sometimes ideas that seem crazy at first are, on reflection, brilliant. Moreover, crazy ideas generally inspire people to have more radical ideas and so spur more creative brainstorming.

Finally, write:

ABSOLUTELY NO SQUELCHING

on the whiteboard, to the side of the area where you will be writing the ideas. Explain that when someone:

- criticises an idea...
- says that an idea will not work...
- says that an idea has already been tried...

The brainstorming session itself comprises four portions:

1. *Introduction to the issue and session.*
2. *Idea generation.*
3. *Evaluation of the ideas.*
4. *Wrap up.*

Squelching – *criticising ideas or brainstormers – is the worst thing that can happen to a brainstorming session. Make sure it does not happen!*

- criticises someone on the basis of her ideas...
- or says anything that is less than positive about ideas or people in the session...

she is squelching. Even a little remark, such as “we tried that last year, it didn't work,” can be highly damaging to the quality of the session. It immediately tells everyone in the session that ideas will be criticised and will cause brainstormers to be more cautious about proposing ideas. As a result, such a remark crushes the potential creativity of a session and can lead to poor results.

Squelching is the worst thing that can happen to a brainstorming session. Ensure everyone understands this.

Finally, let people know how long the session will last. 30-45 minutes is ideal. More than that and the meeting loses its momentum and there is no gain in additional creative ideas.

Ideation

Once the introduction is complete, you may begin the session. The moderator should keep track of the time and write down ideas as they are shouted out.

The first ideas proposed will almost inevitably be obvious ideas. Once people run out of obvious ideas, they will begin stretching their minds more. This is when you begin to see more creative ideas come up.

Once ideas become more creative, it is almost inevitable someone will attempt to squelch an idea. It is absolutely essential that you step in and remind the squelcher that squelching is not allowed. Otherwise, the creativity of the session will be seriously undermined.

The word squelching can be a humorous word and many people, even native-speaking English people, are not familiar with it. As a result it is less harsh that “no criticising ideas” or “do not be negative about ideas”. Thus, telling people, even superiors, that there is no squelching is less jarring and less likely to disrupt the session or cause tension than harsher words. This, in fact, is precisely why we recommend the term squelching.

From time to time, the moderator should inform the brainstormers of the time remaining. If good ideas are still flowing quickly during the last few minutes of the session, feel free to extend the session by five minutes. However, this is rare.

Once time is up, inform the brainstormers and compliment their ideas and their participation. Inform them that the next step is the evaluation.

Ideation is what most people envision when they think about brainstorming. In fact, it is only one part of the traditional brainstorming process.

Evaluation

If evaluation criteria have not yet been established

If you opted to have the brainstormers participate in establishing criteria for the evaluation (see Evaluation Criteria under The Issue above), this is the time to discuss criteria. (Otherwise, skip this paragraph.) Explain the purpose of evaluation criteria and suggest one or two criteria yourself. Write them on the white board. Ask the group to suggest criteria. At this time, you may be critical. The aim is to define five relevant criteria. If suggested criteria are well received by the group, write them on the whiteboard. There may be some flexibility on criteria – one or two more or fewer is acceptable. Once you have reached consensus on the criteria, you may begin the evaluation.

In our experience, criteria based evaluation is by far the best approach for fast, efficient and accurate evaluation of results.

The evaluation

The first step of the evaluation is simply to choose ideas which are potential solutions for the issue. Ask the brainstormers to review their ideas for a couple of minutes and consider which are good solutions and which are not. Then ask them which ideas they believe have the most potential. Mark those ideas. You may also cross out ideas which are clearly unworkable. Continue until you have between three and eight strong ideas. If you as the moderator see that the brainstormers have missed ideas that have potential, you may add those ideas.

Once this has been completed, select the first chosen idea. Then go through each of the criteria and rate how well the idea meets the criterion on a scale of zero to five, where zero indicates the idea does not meet the criterion at all and five indicates it meets the criterion completely. There are two acceptable approaches to calculating the scores:

- 1) Discuss the scores as a group and reach consensus for each score. Write those scores on the whiteboard.
- 2) Have each brainstormer write her own evaluation scores for each idea. The moderator can then take a survey of all scores, calculate the average value for each idea and write it on the whiteboard.

Ideas are judged against criteria using a scale of zero to five; with zero indicating ideas does not meet criterion and five indicating a perfect match.

Continue in this fashion until all ideas have been evaluated and have a score. The higher the score, the better the idea in terms of meeting the criteria you set for the brainstorming session.

When you are done, you will have a list of ideas each with a score reflecting how well it meets the criteria. Generally the top three to five ideas will be the most suitable.

Wrapping up

At the end of the evaluation, the moderator should discuss the top ideas with the brainstormers and note any additional feedback regarding the issue, the ideas and the overall brainstorming session. Any relevant comments should be noted.

Once this is done the organiser of the session should conclude by explaining the next steps that will be taken with the ideas.

It goes without saying that the moderator should thank the brainstormers and compliment them on the quality of their ideas.

It is important to explain to participants what the next steps will be. Even if they are not involved in implementing the ideas, simply knowing that you will use their ideas, will provide positive reinforcement and good will for future brainstorming sessions.



Reporting

Final report

A final report of the brainstorming session should be written. It should include:

- 1) The issue.
- 2) The evaluation criteria.
- 3) The top ranking ideas and their scores indicated as a fraction of the total possible score or as a percentage.
- 4) Any relevant comments raised by the brainstormers at the conclusion of the session.
- 5) Follow up plans.
- 6) Names of the brainstormers.
- 7) list of all ideas raised (optional).

It is worth noting that a brainstorming report is an excellent tool for selling ideas to top management, clients or others. It not only provides ideas, it also provides arguments on why the ideas can be expected to work.

Brainstorm session reports are excellent tools for selling ideas to senior management, clients or others. Not only do they provide ideas, but they provide excellent arguments for implementing the ideas – thanks to the evaluations.

Follow up report

A follow up report should be issued after the ideas have been implemented. The report should cover which idea(s) have been implemented and the results. If no ideas have been implemented, the reasons for non-implementation should be indicated.

Where possible, any relevant metrics, such as income realised from the idea or costs saved as a result of the idea should be included in the report. Such metrics allow you to better determine the value of brainstorming.

Lack of a follow-up report can leave the brainstormers doubting that their ideas have been used and can result in reduced enthusiasm for future brainstorming sessions. Even a report explaining that no ideas have been used is usually better than no follow up report.

Over the years, a lot of brainstormers have been disillusioned because they believe their ideas have never been used. Brainstorm session follow up reports issued to the brainstormers, and others affected by the ideas generated, demonstrate the value of their ideas and motivate brainstormers for future sessions.

Multiple Sessions

When you have a large group of people involved in a brainstorming session, it is recommended that you either use an on-line brainstorming tool (see below) or you run multiple simultaneous brainstorming sessions MSBS.

In an MSBS, introduce the issue as in a normal brainstorming session. Explain also that the group will be divided into teams for ideation and evaluation.

Brainstormers should then be randomly divided into teams of eight to twelve people. Random selection ensures a variety of backgrounds in each team and prevents people from working with people they already know well. Letting people choose their own teams normally results in people choosing colleagues and friends, thus creating less dynamic groups.

Each team should select a moderator who will focus on writing ideas down. Once this has been done, begin the session.

Your responsibility as overall moderator will be to monitor time, answer questions that might arise and, most importantly, walk from group to group to ensure the sessions are running smoothly. In particular, keep your ears open for squelching and stop it the moment you hear it. Also remind the moderators and other brainstormers that it is their job to stop any squelching.

Stop the teams once the idea generation period is up. Explain the evaluation methodology. If the brainstormers are to determine the evaluation criteria, do this with the entire group. Do not have each team come up with its own criteria – it is essential to have consistent criteria across all groups. Each team then evaluates their ideas according to the criteria (as described above).

After all evaluations have been completed, the moderator of each team should report the results to the entire group. Once this has been done, you should lead a discussion on the overall results. Then explain the next steps, thank the participants and compliment them on their creativity.

You will then need to compile all results into an overall report. Most likely a number of ideas will be the same, thus reducing the overall number of ideas.

Reporting and follow up reporting are as above.

Dividing the group into teams

The best method of dividing a large group into teams is to give the teams names, put those names on enough pieces of paper for each person to select a name from a hat (or box) and have everyone in the group pull a team name from the hat.

If you want to have some fun, rather than put the team names in a hat, put words related to the team names in a hat – and do not tell participants what the team names are. Let them figure it out themselves.

For example, the teams could be named after countries and the papers in the hat would have city names on them. Participants would then have to mingle with each other first to determine your method for setting teams and secondly to find their team mates (ie. Other people with names of cities from the same country).

Ideas Campaigns

An ideas campaign is like a massive on-line brainstorming event which can include hundreds, thousands or even tens of thousands of participants.

An ideas campaign is usually managed through a software application that runs on a web site. Participants can log in, read the issue, propose their own ideas and build on other participant's ideas.

An ideas campaign typically lasts from two to six weeks. At the end of the campaign, the most promising ideas are evaluated as described above, using an on-line evaluation tool.

An ideas campaign usually includes all employees in a company, a company's customers or other massive group of people.

The advantages of an ideas campaign over traditional brainstorming include:

1. An ideas campaign allows a very large number of participants who can be in any location.
2. Participants can enter the ideas campaign at any time, submit and collaborate on ideas and leave. Thus there is no need to co-ordinate times for participation.
3. There is more time for thinking about and researching an issue. Thus more elaborate ideas can be submitted.
4. Supporting documents, illustrations and other files can be included with an idea.
5. It is possible to submit ideas anonymously, giving shy people added security about submitting radical ideas

An ideas campaign is most effective as a brainstorming tool for medium to large companies wishing to involve their entire workforce in the ideation process. An ideas campaign can also be an effective tool for capturing ideas from customers or the general public.

The disadvantages of an ideas campaign are:

1. An ideas campaign takes longer than a brainstorming session, hence you will not get any results until at least two weeks after the campaign has begun.
2. An ideas campaign is more passive, hence you do not get the energy and immediacy that is typical in a brainstorming session.
3. Ideas campaigns are not effective with fewer than 50-100 potential participants (note: typically, not all eligible participants to an ideas campaign will actually contribute ideas).
4. Ideas campaigns require a software tool to manage them.

Clearly, an ideas campaign can be very effective in certain circumstances, in particular for large companies wanting to involve their entire workforce in the brainstorming process.

Bwiti, the publishers of this guide, have developed an idea management tool, “Jenni Idea Management” that is based on the ideas campaign principle.

Jenni is available as a permanent idea management solution for companies that wish to run numerous regular ideas campaigns in order to solicit, capture and evaluate ideas on an on-going basis. Jenni is also available for short term rental for managing a single ideas campaign.

For more information, see www.jpbc.com/jenni/.



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