

BRAINSTORMING

What it is:

Brainstorming is a technique, generally used in a group setting, to quickly generate a large number of ideas about a specific problem or topic. It can help you:

- Encourage creative thinking and generate enthusiasm
- Encourage participation and building on the ideas of others
- Avoid the "paralysis of analysis" by not evaluating ideas

How to do it:

The goal of brainstorming is to *generate* ideas. Before you start, make sure everyone in your group understands the importance of *postponing* judgments until after the brainstorming session is completed.

- Write the problem or topic on a blackboard or flipchart where all participants can see it
- Write *all* ideas on the board and do as little editing as possible
- Number each idea for future reference
- There are several brainstorming techniques: structured brainstorming, free-form brainstorming, or silent brainstorming

In structured brainstorming (One-at-a-time method):

- Solicit *one* idea from each person in sequence
- Participants who don't have an idea at the moment may say "pass"
- A complete round of passes ends the brainstorming session
- The *advantage* of structured brainstorming is that each person has an equal chance to participate, regardless of rank or personality

The *disadvantage* of structured brainstorming is that it lacks spontaneity and can sometimes feel rigid and restrictive

In unstructured (or Open-door) brainstorming:

- Participants simply contribute ideas as they come to mind.
- The *advantage* of free-form brainstorming is that participants can build off each other's ideas. The atmosphere is very relaxed.
- The *disadvantage* of free-form brainstorming is that the less assertive or lower ranking participants may not contribute.

An ideal approach is to combine these two methods. Begin the session with a few rounds of structured brainstorming and finish up with a period of unstructured brainstorming.

In silent (or Write-it-down) brainstorming:

- Have participants write ideas individually on sticky-back notes or small slips of paper.
- Collect the papers and post them for all to see.
- The *advantage* of silent brainstorming is that it prevents individuals from making disruptive “analysis” comments during the brainstorming session and provides confidentiality. It can help prevent a group from being unduly influenced by a single participant or common flow of ideas.
- The *disadvantage* of silent brainstorming is that the group loses the synergy that comes from an open session.

Silent brainstorming is best used in combination with other brainstorming techniques.

The result of a brainstorming session is a list of ideas. If this list is too long, the group can boil it down using one of the decision-making tools described later in this section.

Points to remember about Brainstorming:

Never judge ideas as they are generated. The goal of brainstorming is to generate a lot of ideas in a short time. Analysis of these ideas is a separate process, to be done later.

Don't quit at the first lull. All brainstorming sessions reach lulls, which are uncomfortable for the participants. Research indicates that most of the best ideas occur during the last part of a session. Try to encourage the group to push through at least two or three lulls.

Try to write down all of the ideas exactly as they were presented. When you condense an idea to one or two words for ease of recording, you are doing analysis. Analysis should be done later.

Encourage outrageous ideas. While these ideas may not be practical, they may start a flow of creative ideas that can be used. This can help you break through a lull.

Try to have a diverse group. Involve process owners, customers, and suppliers to obtain a diverse set of ideas from several perspectives.

After Brainstorming:

Reduce your list to the most important items

Combine items that are similar

Discuss each item - in turn - on its own merits

Eliminate items that may not apply to original issue or topic

Give each person one final chance to add items

Brainstorming is a FUN way to generate a lot of ideas quickly. Because it is simple and easy to use, however, don't lose sight of the fact it can be a very powerful tool!