



Lunch and Learn

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Idea Generation:

Tricking Your Mind into Better Idea Generation: How to Make Brainstorming More Effective.

Presented by:

Steven Keith

skeith@capstrat.com

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lunchandlearn@capstrat.com

Brainstorming is, by far, the most popular group creativity exercise. Many times brainstorming is frustrating because it fails to produce the desired outcome and the players leave the exercise discouraged. I believe it's because it's not done properly.

By its very nature, creative idea generation, or brainstorming, ought to be free from a rigid structure. But our collective time and energy can be more effectively channeled if we follow a few guidelines to maximize the quality and quantity of the output.

The following are a set of concepts, practices and exercises I have found that help groups work more cohesively to achieve a better possible outcome.

Brainstorming Guidelines

Choose your team wisely

- Keep it level (management vs. non-management); no hierarchy
- Value interdisciplinary involvement
- Not just for “creatives”
- Not just for challenge owners
- Learn forward: re-invite sources of energy

Gel on the objective – Spend the necessary time to articulate the objective. For example, “What are five ways to increase Client X’s media exposure before the end of next quarter?” This may get rewritten or morph into something different and that is perfectly okay, as long as everyone remains in touch with what the objective is. Form the objective as a question with specifics. But balance specifics and openness. Too many specifics or rigidity is counterproductive.

Suspend judgment: punish judgers – Pass no judgment on ideas shared. No haters or naysayers allowed. Everything that is blurted out gets captured no matter what. Many times the wackier ideas, while they may not get used, help the group travel to otherwise uncharted territory. And that is where most good ideas hide. People who judge should be on the receiving end of a foam dart from everyone else.

No topical explanations/justifications – No explanations are needed at this stage. They’ll just bog you down.

Eye-contact/body language awareness – Notice who you tend to look at in the room when you are listing ideas. Do not let the senior people in the room be “magnetic north.”

Pick on the quiet – Encourage the quiet one in the group to start launching ideas along with the rest. Too often, one or two people will dominate a session leaving everyone else to listen. Keep everyone involved.

Eat – It is a well-known fact that food gets people’s juices flowing. Have some snacks in the room.

Cross-industry magazines in the room – these can be great sources of inspiration.

- Architecture
- Home-building
- Technology
- Consumer Reports
- Decorating
- Fashion
- Leading-edge business

Two moderators – A successful brainstorm has two moderators to record what is being said. The vocal moderator is leading the session and is typically standing at the writing wall. The other, the recording moderator, while welcome and encouraged to contribute, is recording the session on paper or on a laptop. If an idea needs further clarification, try to get one of the two moderators to attempt to do the clarification. Two minds interpreting one thought generates new collaborative energy. Take advantage of it.

Quantity first, quality second – Aiming for quality means that judgment is involved and there is no room for that at this time. Set the number of ideas that the group should come up with before getting started (e.g., 90 ideas in 45 min). This little bit of pressure helps the group to focus more on continually generating ideas and less on judgment of ideas or fear of contributing lackluster concepts.

Number the concepts – This makes it possible to make necessary correlations later on and helps the group meet their quantity goals.

Limit time (45:15) – The quality of brainstorms almost always begins to deteriorate after 45 minutes. Aim to get 90 ideas in 45 minutes. That means the group ought to generate 1 idea every 30 seconds. Spend the final 15 minutes on the “Analysis and Selection” stage.

Analysis – Once you get to your goal, spend 25% of your time analyzing and selecting the ideas. The best is to do it democratically. There are many ways to do this; here are three.

1) Have the moderator create three columns; green, yellow and red. The green is go. The group feels that this idea has some merit. Yellow is slow. The idea is not to be dropped but is a prime candidate to be either morphed into another idea, worked further or left alone. Red is stop. The group has decided the idea has no real merit and ought to be thrown out.

2) Give each member of the group 10 decision points. They can assign their points to whichever ideas they feel are strongest. They can park all 10 on one or divvy them up as they see fit. I call them democracy points.

3) Bring a third party in for the remaining 25% of the session and give them each 5 points to spend, having no idea who thought of what. They can be totally unbiased and objective.

Avoid “change of state” – Learn to recognize a change in the state of the storm, when the energy level is dropping. More than 10 seconds of silence is a bad signal.

Quick-shift – Be prepared with an arsenal of different approaches when you sense a change of state. [see below] It’s what you do to keep the meeting’s blood sugar right.

Return to the storm – Dive back in

Record all segues –

“Quick-shifting” Tactics

Kaleidoscope – Have everyone in the room think for 15 seconds about an idea. The moderator then goes around the room and asks what person A thinks person B’s idea was. And person B tries to say what person C was thinking. And so on.

Restate the problem – Write down the solution on the board. See how many times you can logically restate the challenge without using any words more than once.

Rumors – Start silly rumors about your challenge. Your challenge is a an unscrupulous strumpet.

TV Guide – Pick one television character for every person in the room. Everyone takes turns talking about solutions in the character they are playing. Allow everyone to play each character at least once.

Random Word – Select a random word, say, “protein.” Now everyone has to apply that random word to an idea or solution.

Rapid-fire storytelling – This is about taking turns around the room, adding one line to a linear story about the ideation subject. It has to be quickly paced where you aren’t given a comfortable amount of time to think (3 seconds). The aim is to dig into the subconscious. Keep going around until the group agrees to quit. At least three full group revolutions is typical.

Six Thinking Hats

This strategy is to battle judgmental or adversarial energy. It forces an idea generation group to think in parallel. Six people wear one of six hats and take that approach to the problem.

1. Information
2. Emotion
3. Optimism
4. Pessimism
5. Growth
6. Process

Six Serving Men — This is an analysis exercise. It refers to a Rudyard Kipling poem where the six serving men are Who, What, Where, When, Why and How. You simply ask all these questions and get to the bottom of the issue.

The “What if-alanche” — Keep proceeding with ridiculous “what ifs.” The more preposterous, the better. Then keep going while one or two alternating people answer the what ifs. This only works if you keep pressing on.

Found objects — This approach is simple and takes everyone’s mind into a new direction. The object can be anything at all. Everyone in the room has to take turns talking about the found object in the context of the ideation subject — then passing the object to the next person. There are no rules.

Reversing the challenge/FAIL on purpose — Approach the issue from the other direction: How can we make sure that we fail? As a matter of fact, how do we make absolutely sure that we are doing the worst we can?

Similes — This is a way to get under the challenge and look at it from another perspective. It allows the group to draw similarities between the challenge at hand and the more pedestrian commons in our consciousness. For example, Product X is like a hyper-concierge service at a great hotel.

Who’s in the Room?

- Select somewhat carefully
- Keep it level (mgnt:non-mgnt) No hierarchy
- Vocal moderator + recording moderator
- Value interdisciplinary involvement
- Not just for “creatives”
- Not just for challenge owners
- Learn forward: re-invite sources of energy

“Change of State”

- Recognize change in state
- Be prepared
- Quickshift
- Return to the storm
- Record all segues

“Quick-shifting”

- What is “quick-shifting?”
 - Kaleidoscope
 - Restate the problem
 - Rumors: Your challenge is a total whore
 - TV Guide
 - Random Word
 - Rapid-fire storytelling (linear)
 - Six Thinking Hats
 - Information
 - Emotion
 - Optimism
 - Pessimism
 - Growth
 - Process
 - Six serving men
 - Who
 - What
 - Where
 - When
 - Why
 - How
 - The What if-alanche
 - Found objects
 - Reversing the challenge/FAIL on purpose
 - Similes