



Brainstorming

Brainstorming is a procedure that encourages divergent thinking and the production of many different ideas in a short period of time. It is a method of generating ideas in quantity with the intention of getting the full participation of all group members. In essence, it represents a period of time in which all evaluation is suspended and ideas are allowed to develop freely on a particular issue. It is a time for free association of ideas and for opening new avenues of thought.

Brainstorming helps a group by:

1. Increasing member involvement and participation
2. Providing a means of getting the most ideas in a short period of time.
3. Reducing the need to look for the “right” idea in order to impress authority figures in the group
4. Making the session more fun, interesting and stimulating
5. Reducing the possibility of negative sub grouping, competition, or one-upmanship during the problem-solving process.

A Typical Brainstorming Exercise:

Phase 1

Divide a large organization into small groups limiting each to no more than seven members. Each group is given a newsprint pad and marker. One person from each group is assigned to write down the brainstorming suggestions. Remember, each suggestion is written down and no evaluation or discussion is taken at that time.

Brainstorming ground rules

1. During the first phase all criticism or evaluation of an idea is rule out. Ideas are suggested and placed before the group without evaluation or critical analysis.
2. Wild ideas are expected in the spontaneity that evolves when the group suspends judgment. Practical considerations are not important at this point. The session is to be freewheeling. Piggy backing on the suggestions of others is to be allowed and encouraged.

Phase 2

The second part of the exercise is to evaluate the suggestions, and as a small group, rank them. The groups then join together, and one person from each small group presents the suggestions to the large group. The large group ranks the suggestions. After hearing the small group’s suggestions, the large group ranks them as a whole. The alternatives are discussed, and a decision follows.

Why Brainstorming works:

1. Brainstorming will be more productive if ideas are not evaluated or discussed the time they are proposed. This is important because education and experience have trained most of us to think judiciously rather than creatively. By deferring judgment of the ideas, there can be more alternatives from which to choose.

2. Group production of ideas can be more productive than separate, individual production of ideas. Experiments in group thinking have demonstrated that the average participant in this kind of creative collaboration can think of twice as many possible solutions as when working alone.
3. The more ideas generated the better. In almost any type of problem-solving, it is far more likely to choose the right path toward solution if ideas are suggested as possible alternatives instead of only two or three.

Adapted from Kevin P. Jackson, "Brainstorming," NACA Programmers Handbook