Brainstorming

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The purpose of this free information is to enable someone, without previous experience of the technique and with a minimum of preparation, to introduce brainstorming to a group and then go on to brainstorm a specific problem or opportunity.

Definition

Brainstorming involves a spontaneous, open-ended discussion in a search for new ideas. It is a means of getting a large number of ideas from a group of people in a short time. It can prove valuable for identifying opportunities, for example, for market development, tackling organisational problems or problem solving in general.

Advantages

- Numerous fresh ideas and concepts are rapidly generated.
- It enables people to be involved and make a positive contribution.
- The cost of the process - in terms of people and time - is quantifiable.

Problems

- The session can be dictated or side-tracked by dominant individuals.
- Getting people to be non-critical can be a problem.

These problems can be overcome by a good facilitator. See step 3 below.

Action checklist - Preparation

1. Select the problem / 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.

2. 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.

3. Choose the Facilitator...

... an open, outgoing person with enthusiasm and ability, contributing interest and enjoyment. Choosing the right facilitator is vital. (S)he 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. Perhaps most importantly, (s)he should be adept at keeping ideas flowing.

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 (s)he has some experience. The facilitator should feel comfortable running activity-based sessions and should have clear plans and tactics for arriving at expected outcomes or targets. The facilitator must also ensure, as much as possible, that the group works as a team and owns what it has achieved at the end.

4. 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 'contemplating their corporate navel' and is often better for a fresh perspective on the business in hand.

5. Think of the group mix

As well as those with a specialist contribution to make include those 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, avoidance of snide or put-down comments and creating a 'free-from-blame' atmosphere. All participants are equal, and none are more equal than others.

6. 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 tackled.

7. Get the equipment right

You will need to record the ideas that come up. A tape-recorder smacks of 'big brother' and may well act as an inhibitor to the free flow of ideas. Get hold of a flip-chart - with plenty of sheets and plenty of marker pens that work! - so that successive sheets can be blu-tacked to the wall in full view and therefore help to stimulate further ideas.

8. Get the layout right

Do not use a room with fixed rows of seats. Something more relaxed, even random, is preferable; a circle or U-shape is fairly usual. If the facilitator is not familiar with the room to be used, (s)he should check it beforehand and prepare it appropriately.

9. 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. 10-20 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.

10. Get the time of day right

Unfortunately, hard advice is difficult here as we are all different. 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 the day's toil.
Provide sufficient notice of the session, and an outline of the problem to be tackled.

Action checklist - The session

1. State the problem / objective

State the problem and explain it to the group. Make sure everyone participating has a clear understanding.

2. Restate the problem

Encourage the group to stand back from the problem, walk around it, and see it from every angle. Suggest re-wording it in 'How to..' 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.

3. Brainstorm the problem with the following guidelines:

a) Suspend judgement: avoid evaluative comments such as 'that won't work' or 'that sounds silly'. Laugh *with* wild ideas, not *at* them.
b) Use the following techniques for generating further ideas.

- Call for a one-minute break, asking the group to look over ideas already noted before starting the flow again.
- Offer a target: e.g. 'we just need six more to make 50 ideas!'
- Reflect and concentrate on one idea, e.g. how many ways can we do this?
- Look back at the re-statements to pursue other lines

c) Freewheel: encourage (within limits) drifting or dreaming; try to bring the subconscious into play; the wilder the idea, the better.
d) Go for quantity not quality - the more the merrier; suspend judgement, evaluation comes later.
e) Cross-fertilize: pick up somebody's idea and suggest others leading from it.

4. Ask the group to choose a really wild and apparently senseless idea from the lists marked up and generate ideas from there

5. Closure

Give a warning of when the session will close 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.

Action checklist - Evaluation

1. 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, clearly require too much resource, or do not meet the orginal objectives.

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

3. Use reverse brainstorming

- In how many ways can a particular idea fail?
- What are the negative factors?
- What is the potential downside for the organisation?

4. Apply the key evaluative criteria

- What will it cost?
- Will it be acceptable to management, staff, customers?
- Is it legal?
- Is it practical?
- How long will it take?
- What competition will there be?
- How urgent is it? (If it is not done now, will an opportunity be lost?)

Dos and don'ts for Brainstorming

Do

In the brainstorming session, the facilitator should:

- be sensitive to participants' tiredness
- encourage freedom of movement - some people think better when mobile
- use a variety of techniques to generate further ideas
- encourage an informal atmosphere free from blame or inhibition.

Don't

(S)he should not:

- let the session go on too long
- allow interruptions
- use a tape-recorder
- allow critical or evaluative comments
- allow the session to become too 'off-the-wall'!

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