

## Problem Solving: Brainstorming

### Description:

This tool provides guidelines on the brainstorming process and offers concrete steps to leading a brainstorming session.

### How it can be used:

Problem-solving through brainstorming is a powerful yet creative technique to identify and develop new ideas and options. Brainstorming motivates people because it involves everyone and it gets the group working together. However, brainstorming is not simply a random activity; it needs to be structured.

Review the guidelines and process steps to understand the who, the what, the why and the how of leading a brainstorm session. Use brainstorming well and you will see great results that will improve your organization's performance and help develop your teams.

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Brainstorming is a useful way of generating radical solutions to problems, as long as it is managed well. During the brainstorming process there is no criticism of ideas, and free rein is given to people's creativity (criticism and judgment stifle creativity.) This tends to make group brainstorming sessions enjoyable experiences, which in turn, brings team members together. Using brainstorming also helps people commit to solutions, because they have participated in the development process. Brainstorming places a significant burden on the facilitator as they manage the process, the people (involvement and sensitivities), and the follow up.

### Brainstorming process:

1. **Define and agree on the objective.** Ensure everyone participating in the brainstorm session understands and agrees on the aim of the session (i.e., to develop a series of new promotional activities for children's programs). Keep the brainstorming objective simple. Allocate a time limit. This will enable you to keep the random brainstorming activity under control and on track.
2. **Brainstorm ideas and suggestions while adhering to the time limit.** Encourage everyone to participate, dismiss nothing, and prevent others from making fun of the wilder suggestions (people won't participate if their suggestions are criticized). During the random collection of ideas, the facilitator must record every suggestion on the flip-chart.
3. **Categorize/condense/combine/refine.** At the end of the time limit or when ideas have been exhausted, categorise, group, connect and link the random ideas. Condense and refine the ideas by making new headings or lists. Weaker ideas can be diplomatically combined or included within other themes to avoid dismissing or rejecting contributions (remember brainstorming is about team building and motivation too - you don't want it to have the reverse effect on some people).
4. **Assess and analyze the results.** As a group, assess, evaluate and analyze the validity of ideas on the list.
5. **Prioritise options and rank as appropriate.** Further develop ideas, if necessary, and then prioritize in a finished list of options and actions.
6. **Agree on actions and timeline.** Agree what the next actions will be. Determine the timeline and assign responsibility.
7. **Provide follow-up.** Following the session, circulate notes and give feedback. It is important that participants feel their efforts and contributions were worthwhile. When people see their efforts have resulted in action and change, they will be motivated and keen to help again.

### **Steps to leading a brainstorming session:**

- Confirm a meeting room that will accommodate the group, ensuring that everyone can see the facilitator.
- Appoint a recorder and agree on how notes will be recorded. Remember that everyone needs to be able to see the notes – consider flip charts, projectors, whiteboards, etc.
- It is always a good idea to begin with an ice-breaker exercise. Even if people are used to working together, it is a good tactic to introduce a fun and collaborative atmosphere.
- Clearly define the problem that is being considered. Explain any criteria that must be met. Describe the objective of the meeting – to generate as many ideas as possible. Explain how the brainstorm process works, clearly noting the collaborative non-judgemental approach.
- Allow participants plenty of individual time at the beginning of the session to generate as many ideas as possible.
- Ask all the participants for their ideas to ensure everyone has an opportunity to contribute.
- Encourage people to build on other people's ideas and use current ideas to create new ones.
- Encourage an enthusiastic and non-judgemental approach and attitude within the group. Be aware and get everyone to contribute and build on ideas, especially those that have been quiet.
- Ensure that no one criticizes or jumps to evaluate any suggested ideas during the session. Criticism stifles creativity and hinders the spirit of the brainstorming session.
- Encourage all participants to have fun with the process and present as many ideas as possible. Be prepared for a range of ideas, from strictly practical to wild and crazy. Embrace creativity!
- Ensure that participants do not get stuck on a single train of thought for too long. Prompt them to generate many different ideas, in addition to exploring individual ideas in detail.
- Follow the informal rules of encouraging creativity; allow plenty of breaks; have people move around; ensure there is sufficient light; and introduce humour.
- When the session is completed, recap the content so participants see how their input is reflected.
- Commit to circulating notes of the session by a certain date.