

OVERVIEW



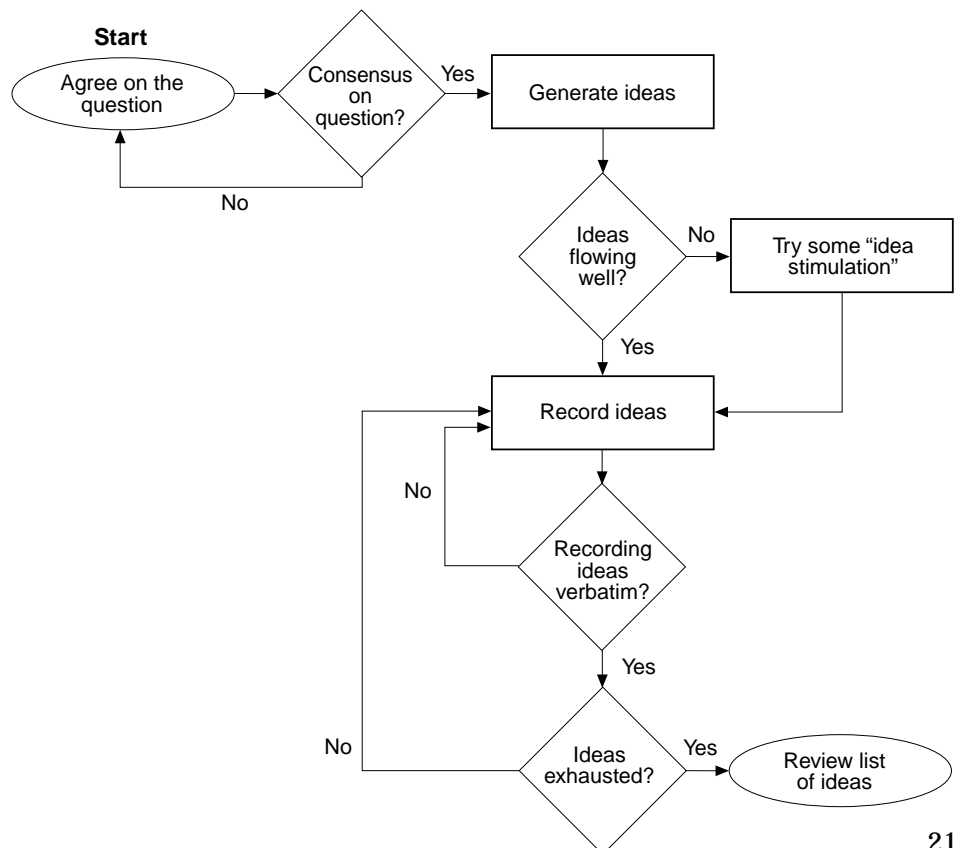
Brainstorming

*Creating bigger
& better ideas*

IS THIS THE RIGHT TOOL? ASK . . .

- ▶ Do you need a way to help a team broaden their focus and open the range of options they consider?
- ▶ Is the team bored or tired of the analytical process? Do members need a creative break?
- ▶ Do you need a way to maximize one of the key benefits of teamwork: team members use the ideas of others as springboards for their own contributions?
- ▶ Has the team discussion become circular and stuck?

STEPS AT A GLANCE





BRAINSTORMING

- Q. What if the brainstorm starts and no one says anything?
- A. Use humor and fun to loosen the team up. Use exercises that will perform like the intellectual equivalent of WD40, unclogging any rusty hinges of the mind. These visual stimuli, unusual juxtapositions, and fun games can help the team feel more confident and excited about brainstorming. (See the Learning Activity section in this chapter for a few ideas.)
- Q. What are the advantages and disadvantages of structured vs. unstructured brainstorming?
- A. Here they are:
- Structured Brainstorming** (Each team member gives ideas in turn.)
- Advantages*
- Ensures that everyone will have the opportunity to give input.
 - Helps diffuse the effect of a dominant team member.
 - Adds a science to the process that can set more logical, analytical people at ease.
- Disadvantages*
- Can make timid team members feel put on the spot.
- Unstructured Brainstorming** (Team members give ideas as they come to mind.)
- Advantages*
- Creates a free flowing, positively chaotic environment.
 - May create more spontaneous and unusual connections.
- Disadvantages*
- Requires more vigilant facilitation to make sure contributions are balanced.
- Q. Isn't it better to evaluate and discuss ideas as they are generated to help "weed" them out early?
- A. Every idea is potentially a good one. In order to encourage people to share their ideas, you need to create an environment where they know what they say will not be criticized. Commenting on ideas, beyond simple requests for clarification, will slow the pace of the brainstorm and inhibit the free exchange of ideas. There will be time for evaluation of ideas later.

If: There is a lag in the number of ideas being offered . . .

Then: Remember that silence is okay. Sometimes a little quiet space is just what people need to gather up more mental energy and present new ideas. If after some silence, ideas are still not flowing, try stating the question slowly a couple of times. Ask some non-leading questions, like *“What else should we consider when planning for this new area of our business/resolving this problem/developing this new product?”* After these attempts to get every last idea from the team, end the brainstorm with the reminder that members can always come back later and add things that they didn’t think of during the brainstorm. It’s important to keep the avenue for ideas open.

If: A person with authority begins to “take over” the process . . .

Then: Try saying things like *“Does anyone else have any ideas?”* or *“Thank you (name). That’s useful input. Does that trigger anything for anyone else?”* If the situation reaches the point where other team members are inhibited to speak or the tension in the room is too high, this is a good time to use the structured methodology, if you are not already. It’s okay to switch from unstructured to structured part way through the process, as long as you transition smoothly.

LEARNING ACTIVITY

Here are some potential warm-up brainstorm topics. Experiment with visual aids and hands-on methods to get team members’ thoughts loosened up.

- ▶ You’re standing in the express lane at the supermarket behind a person who has more than 12 items. What are all the ways to get that person out of your lane?
- ▶ What are all the things you could do with the junk mail you receive?
- ▶ A meteorite lands on your front lawn one night. What are all the ways you could use the resulting crater and debris?
- ▶ Take something from your pocket or briefcase (such as a pen, lighter, tissue, or key). Think of 20 to 30 new ways you could use that item.

STEP 1 AGREEING ON THE QUESTION

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► All Aboard

In all variations of brainstorming, a high-quality framing question is pivotal to the success of the exercise. Ways to test the team's comfort with the framing question include:

- Asking one or two team members to paraphrase the question before committing it to paper.
- Having the team underline the words of the question that they want emphasized.
- Doing a mini brainstorm to test the question. Check in after one minute and ask “*Does this still make sense to us?*”

► The Champions of Brainstorming

The real heroes and heroines of the brainstorming process are those free thinkers who make unusual, flexible connections between things. They raise the energy level in the group and are committed to finding solutions. They are independent thinkers who are not afraid to say something that people might laugh at. **Tip:** Fill the team with as many of these bright stars as possible.

Caution: As with all participative tools, watch out for dominating authority figures. As the team's coach, you need to make sure that the opinions of people in organizational leadership roles are not overemphasized simply because they are “in charge.” Reinforce the fact that everyone has something to contribute to the issue.

STEP 2 GENERATING IDEAS

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► “More is Better” or “Quantity Begets Quality”

No matter what the title, the story remains the same. The more ideas the team generates, the higher the probability they will find a breakthrough idea that will help them succeed in their aim. Your role as coach is to use all means possible to help team members free their minds, make serendipitous connections, and generate a bounty of ideas.

In addition to the proven and reliable “structured” and “unstructured” methods of brainstorming, and the 6-3-5 method offered in *The Memory Jogger™ II*, here are just a couple of the fun and powerful options for brainstorming ideas.

Brutethink

This is a method described by Michael Michalko in *Thinkertoys: A Handbook of Business Creativity for the 90s* (Ten Speed Press, 1991). Brutethink challenges the team to force unusual relationships between things as a means for surfacing new ideas and patterns. Michalko suggests using things like random words, (which he provides a thought provoking list of), new noun and verb relationships, magazines, and shapes to stimulate ideas. Such methods help break up old paradigms and mental prisons and can move the team into a higher and freer level of thought.

Crawford Slip Method (CSM)

In 1925, C.C. Crawford of the University of Southern California used an innovative method of generating new ideas as part of his Slip Method. There is a good summary and a list of references on this method in “The Crawford Slip Method,” *Quality Progress*, May 1992. Crawford’s brainstorming process, generally involving approximately 20 people, starts by preparing “targets” (or framing statements) and writing individual ideas on small slips of paper. The slips are then sorted and grouped by the facilitators. Once they have offered their ideas, participants usually don’t have any more involvement in processing the combined data. Also, unlike methods that rely on piggybacking ideas on each other, the ideas in the CSM are generated individually, anonymously, and without group exchange. Team members will experience a noteworthy loss with this method: the opportunity to free associate with everyone’s ideas. However, it may be a good option for a team that is diverse in terms of authority or has a few members who are particularly dominating.

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STEP 3 RECORDING IDEAS

Rules of the Game

- Make sure all ideas are recorded as spoken. The power of the pen is a heady one. It’s tempting to edit and interpret ideas as they are spoken, but this practice will eventually demoralize the group and discourage members from contributing. Everyone wants to feel that their idea, as they state it, is of value.
- Keep all ideas visible at all times. Try recording ideas on flipchart paper and posting the sheets of paper to the wall as they are filled or finding a large surface that you can write on and that will hold all of the ideas at once. Be creative about how to achieve this end.

Variation: Mindmapping

This tool for recording brainstorming is gaining in popularity and earning a good track record. Mindmapping was developed by Tony Buzan, and you can find a user-friendly guide to the method in *Mindmapping: Your Personal Guide to Exploring Creativity and Problem-Solving* by Joyce Wycoff, Berkley Books, 1991.

Using the same behavioral brainstorming principles as outlined here and in *The Memory Jogger™ II*, mindmapping can lead the team members through the development of a graphical depiction of their ideas. The basic construction guidelines, as outlined in Wycoff’s book, are:

- Place a focusing image or statement in the center of a page.
- Use key words to represent ideas.
- Print one key word per line.
- Connect key word ideas to the central focus with lines.
- Use color to highlight and emphasize ideas.
- Use images and symbols to highlights ideas and stimulate other connections.

STEP 4 CHECKING: IDEAS EXHAUSTED?

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► Pace

Keep the pace fast. Quick generation of ideas and connections does at least two good things. It makes it more likely that good ideas will be recorded before they are lost, and it keeps the energy and excitement meter on high.

Just as a popcorn popper will start out with a pop or two, build to a wild melee of rapid popping, and gradually descend to just the occasional pop, so too will the team's brainstorming. Keep drawing out new ideas with neutral questions, and allow free air space for people to think of new ideas. But when your team is too pooped to pop, it's time to stop.

STEP 5 REVIEWING LIST OF IDEAS

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► What Stays and What Goes?

Here is where the team might begin to evaluate and separate the ideas. Purge the list of only the ideas that are virtually identical to another.

One way to help your group move forward with the information they generated is to separate the ideas into lists like "Things we can do easily and immediately" and "Things that require more attention or research." Help the team decide what the categories should be, and encourage them to make the categories action-oriented. This will help the team feel that they have made a productive end to their brainstorming effort.

► Where to Now?

Brainstorming is the primary input for the Activity Network Diagram (AND), Affinity Diagram, Process Decision Program Chart (PDPC), and Tree Diagram. Brainstorming is also critical in the effective use of the Cause & Effect/Fishbone Diagram and the process Flowchart.



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