



How We Think and Learn

Brainstorming¹

Sometimes it's hard to get started on a project. You just can't think what to do next. One strategy for getting out a lot of ideas quickly is Brainstorming. This helps you and others to create a list of ideas in response to an initial question or idea.

Brainstorming emphasizes:

- broad and creative thinking
- inviting all participants' points of view
- ensuring that all relevant aspects of an issue or question are considered

Here's an example of a question that might benefit from the brainstorming approach: ***How should we tell people about our upcoming open house in order that we get good attendance?***

Brainstorming Steps

Use a flipchart, whiteboard, or blackboard and follow these steps:

1. Introduce your need (ideas) and how brainstorming works:
 - All ideas, however simple or creative, are welcome
 - No one will comment on the ideas during the brainstorm
 - If you wish, offer a one minute "quiet period" before the brainstorm for people to reflect upon or start lists of ideas on their own
 - Explain what will be done with the brainstormed ideas
2. Write the question about which you want ideas at the top of the board or first page of flipchart paper.
3. Start the quiet time for individual writing if you decide to use that.
4. Begin the brainstorm.

¹ Adapted from Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Organization & Employee Development Web site <http://web.mit.edu/hr/oed/toolbox/brainstorm.html>

5. Guide the brainstorm by writing ideas as they come, stopping any comments that evaluate ideas and inviting new ideas, and encouraging the group to share their ideas freely. Help generate energy and free-thinking through encouragement.
6. When one flipchart page is full, tear and post it where it is visible, then start the next.
7. As the responses slow down, suggest some ideas that might stimulate further ideas, offer last chances for additional ideas, then stop the brainstorm. Thanks people for participating.
8. Number or letter the ideas when you have the full list.
9. Ask for clarification of any ideas that are not clear to you or others.

Tips from Experience

Brainstorming relies on people thinking and sharing freely. Remind them of this as you enter the activity, and reinforce initial ideas and creative ideas to help everyone participate freely and fully.

Be ready to stop the first effort at judging a suggested idea (as well as subsequent judging types of comments). Remind the group that brainstorming accepts all ideas without criticism or evaluation.

Especially in groups where some individuals may be more reflective thinkers, give people a minute to start jotting down some thoughts on their own before starting the group brainstorm aloud. This will help those people get started with the whole group and generally that will keep them going.

Writing technique: Use two different colored markers, alternating them with each idea. Make your letters 1.5 inches high or more so all can see (and work off of).

With an active group, use two scribes so the writing doesn't slow down the idea generation.

Taking Action

What do you do with your brainstormed list? Here are some of many possible options.

You may want to take the list to review yourself, and act according to what you have and what you have to do.

You may want to process the ideas by asking the group to make comments that build the ideas according to some criterion, i.e. "Let's go down the list and give me a next step for making this idea happen."

You may want to develop a shorter list from the full list by combining related items or prioritizing the items according to some criteria or by group opinion.

One way to prioritize items on a list is to use "sticky dot" voting. Give each participant 1-3 sticky dots and ask them to put a dot next to the items they think most answer the original question. Identify those items that get the most votes and eliminate those items that have the fewest votes. This is not a mechanistic process. Leave time for discussion if someone feels strongly about an item.