

Brainstorming

What is Brainstorming?

Brainstorming is a method for developing creative solutions to problems. It works by focusing on a problem, and then deliberately coming up with as many deliberately unusual solutions as possible and by pushing the ideas as far as possible.

One approach to brainstorming is to 'seed' the session with a word pulled randomly from a dictionary. This word as a starting point in the process of generating ideas.

During the brainstorming session there is no criticism of ideas - the idea is to open up as many possibilities as possible, and break down preconceptions about the limits of the problem.

Once this has been done the results of the brainstorming session can be analyzed and the best solutions can be explored either using further brainstorming or more conventional solutions.

How to Brainstorm

The following rules are important to brainstorming successfully:

- A leader should take control of the session, initially defining the problem to be solved with any criteria that must be met, and then keeping the session on course. He or she should encourage an enthusiastic, uncritical attitude among brainstormers and encourage participation by all members of the team. The session should be announced as lasting a fixed length of time, and the leader should ensure that no train of thought is followed for too long. The leader should try to keep the brainstorming on subject, and should try to steer it towards the development of some practical solutions.
- Participants in the brainstorming process should come from as wide a range of disciplines with as broad a range of experience as possible. This brings many more creative ideas to the session.
- Brainstormers should be encouraged to have fun brainstorming, coming up with as many ideas as possible, from solidly practical ones to wildly impractical ones in an environment where creativity is welcomed.
- Ideas must not be criticized or evaluated during the brainstorming session. Criticism introduces an element of risk for a group member in putting forward an idea. This stifles creativity and cripples the free running nature of a good brainstorming session.
- Brainstormers should not only come up with new ideas in a brainstorming session, but should also 'spark off' from associations with other people's ideas and develop other people's ideas.
- A record should be kept of the session either as notes or a tape recording. This should be studied subsequently for evaluation. It can also be helpful to jot down ideas on a board which can be seen by all brainstormers.

Individual vs. group brainstorming

Brainstorming can either be carried out by individuals, groups or both:

- Individual brainstorming tends to produce a wider range of ideas than group brainstorming, but tends not to develop the ideas as effectively, perhaps as individuals on their own run up against problems they cannot solve. Individuals are free to explore ideas in their own time without any fear of criticism, and without being dominated by other group members.
- Group brainstorming develops ideas more deeply and effectively, as when difficulties in the development of an idea by one person are reached, another person's creativity and experience can be used to break them down. Group brainstorming tends to produce fewer ideas (as time is spent developing ideas in depth) and can lead to the suppression of creative but quiet people by loud and uncreative ones.
- Individual and group brainstorming can be mixed, perhaps by defining a problem, and then letting team members initially come up with a wide range of possibly shallow solutions. These solutions could then be enhanced and developed by group brainstorming.