Brainstorming

Idea In Short

> Using the brain to storm a problem

This is how Alex Osborn, the inventor of brainstorming, described his creativity technique. Brainstorming is a format for groups to try to solve a task or problem by jointly exploring and evaluating ideas.

Origins of brainstorming

In the late 1930s, Alex Osborn was fed up to the back teeth. As among the co-founders of the advertising agency BDO, Osborn felt that there were dozens of meetings that were anything, but inspiring. He felt that the meetings lasted too long, were tiring and inhibited creativity. Osborn recalled the 400-year-old Indian method - Prai Barshana – and improved upon it. He named this new technique after this Indian method:

> using the brain to storm a problem

Later, Charles Hutchison Clark developed brainstorming as a method for finding ideas in a team. Today, brainstorming is one of the most popular methods to generate new ideas, solve business and organizational problems and aid creativity. To solve a specific problem, a group engages in spontaneous expressions, without judgement or critique to generate and develop a large number of ideas.

Brainstorming procedure

Brainstorming follows a clear process of

1. Preparation
2. Execution
3. Follow-up

Preparation

To prepare for an effective brainstorming session, put together a team based on the problem you wish to solve. If the problem requires deep subject matter expertise, then you may have to draw upon a team of specialists in that specific subject area. On the other hand, if you are trying to solve a generic problem that benefits from diversity of thoughts, then put together a diverse cross-functional team to cover a range of topics. Ensure that the team is self-sufficient i.e. it has all the competences to holistically address the problem.

Execution

This is the idea generation and evaluation stage of the brainstorming process. Establish the ground rules the team should follow in the course of the brainstorming process. Then, share the procedure and time box (e.g. 30 or 45 minutes) for the session with the team. Assign a dedicated notes / minute-taker with the same skill set as the moderator, if possible. If not done already, formulate the problem that the team should collectively solve. If possible, present the problem visibly on a blackboard, a flip chart or a whiteboard, so the team can easily refer to the problem statement and stay focused during the brainstorming session. With the basics completed, the participants can now spontaneously engage in discussions. You may require that each team member shares an idea to solve the problem and avoid group think. Ideally, the participants should inspire each other, so they can build upon other ideas or derive a solution from individual ideas. The note taker should document all the ideas that emerge during the discussions. The note taker or the moderator should consciously abstain from translating, interpreting or summarizing the ideas. The ideas should be documented in the original form or as close as possible. The team should then evaluate all the ideas generated during the brainstorming session. The moderator may help structure the ideas by grouping together similar ideas, analysing and filtering out duplicate ideas, etc. The moderator should time box the evaluation process to avoid over-synthesizing the ideas.

Follow-up

Following the execution step, the team and the moderator should jointly agree on the next steps. The brainstorming team should collectively agree on who does what by when. The

team should also agree when they meet again for a second round, review the status of action items, etc. During this stage, the moderator and note taker should prepared the minutes of the brainstorming session and share it with all the participants. It is also recommended to communicate new information, findings and developments on a regular basis.

Brainstorming rules

For brainstorming to be effective, the team should follow some simple rules:

- The criticism of ideas and thoughts is forbidden to every participant, including the moderator and note taker
- General criticism of individual idea providers is also not allowed
- The team should strive for an appreciative, open and fair communication to solve the problem or task
- Any idea – as unlikely as it may sound – is a good idea
- Ideas expressed may be further developed by all participants. There is therefore no copyright on ideas
- Maintain clear time limits as a timebox (e.g. 45 minutes for idea generation and 30 minutes for idea evaluation)
- Document the goals and individual ideas across all the brainstorming sessions around the problem
- Communicate updates, new findings and information with all the participants
- Every participant can, but does not have to, participate
- The participants should be able to contribute to problem solving
- All team members should be respectful to each other, understand the process, the rules and expectations

Good practices

Sometimes the problem might be too broad to be solved in a single brainstorming session. In such a case, schedule additional brainstorming sessions upfront, so the participants can plan their work week around these sessions. At times, questions may emerge during the brainstorming sessions. These questions may uncover the need for additional data / research. Or, the questions may be just be too broad / deep to be addressed in a single setting. In this case, decompose the question into sub-questions and address them

individually over several brainstorming sessions. In general, if the team can't cover all sub-questions or the initial problem within a session, schedule additional sessions as required. To keep to the time box, assign a dedicated timekeeper. Empower the time keeper to interrupt the session, if the team is going off-track. Brainstorming encourages lively exchange among the participants. So, you may need to actively steer the discussions towards the problem to achieve the desired outcome. Collecting and evaluating the ideas is, perhaps, the most important and vastly underrated tasks in the entire brainstorming process. To converge on a great solution, not only is the quantity of derived ideas important, but more importantly, the quality of team members' contributions. The moderator will facilitate the convergence. Yet, the participants should absolutely subscribe to the ground rules. If required, they should step in and remind other team members in a friendly manner to bring the discussions back on course.

Closing

Finally, brainstorming can be an enriching experience to both, participants, moderators and note takes. But, the participants should not trivialize the brainstorming sessions. Many great ideas evolved through a collective application of brain power. Brainstorming is about problem solving. Ideas are a means to an end; not an end in themselves. Hence, it is advisable to ensure that ideas are implemented and the participants are aware of these developments.

Summary

Brainstorming sounds relatively simple in theory. However, in practice, this process is not always easy to implement. Consultants, often called upon to moderate such sessions, should understand the process and associated dynamics to facilitate the team to converge towards the expected outcomes. Consultants may be called upon to put an impending conflict, end unproductive discussions, terminate futile programs, or even pursue mundane activities, such as pointing the team out to the ground rules, in the midst of a spirited discussion. Without a good moderator, it is difficult to organize an effective and successful brainstorming session. Consultants could vastly help their clients to derive innovative ideas from within their ranks. As a consultant on such a scenario, your intervention matters a lot. If you do not intervene, then those extroverted employees and supervisors will dominate the

discussions and many ideas from introverted employees will remain unheard of, to speak. Then, the brainstorming session is an epic fail. Therefore, as a consultant on such an engagement, ensure that you know the bounds to steer your client towards the most optimum outcome from such efforts.