Straw Man Proposal

Idea In Short

The straw man is hypothesis-driven problem-solving technique used by consulting powerhouses, such as McKinsey. It is an iterative process for arriving at increasingly better solutions. As this approach is iterative & hypothesis-driven, the consulting team should be prepared to discard it if necessary & create a new straw man. The premise is to create a draft version for criticism & testing, & then use the feedback for subsequent iterations, & eventually develop a proposal that is rock solid. In short, strawman proposal is:

- A problem-solving approach works well in a group setting
- Used to knock it down & develop better hypotheses
- Helps brainstorm possible solutions when you have somewhere to start
- Involves other stakeholders in the building of the proposal
- Helps you get started versus getting bogged down seeking perfection

The straw man proposal was developed by McKinsey & is often used to solve customer problems in a more structured manner. Often used in a rhetorical sense, straw man refers to a human figure made of straw, such as a scarecrow. Such straw men are easy to pull apart, destroy, & rebuild. The straw man proposal concerns itself with the potential improvements, innovations or adjustments based on an original draft. Companies can leverage this technique to address problems & deficiencies with the intent to brainstorm solutions. A straw man proposal is a concept version of something the team can discuss, break down, & improve. It is based on hypotheses & makes it easy to introduce increasingly better solutions in subsequent iterations.

Why create a straw man proposal?

The straw man proposal is a way of discussing a problem with a group of people & developing a draft version. It is a great tool for brainstorming & creative problem-solving across all phases of an engagement & all levels of the organizational hierarchy. You can also

include customers in the brainstorming process. The most common scenario where this technique most helps is when coming up with an initial hypothesis to arrive at a potentially overarching solution to a problem. However, you should never expect this technique to provide the ultimate answer. Instead, you should use it as a tool to arrive at the best possible solution. Arguments & ideas that arise from the straw man proposal provide valuable feedback in a solution-oriented process. However, you should be ready to adjust & improve your hypothesis & assumptions based on new findings. Often, the counter arguments lead to the ultimate solution. Using the straw man proposal, you can create temporary solutions. From there, people can start to think more creatively, engage in fact-finding activities & conduct focused discussions. Therefore, all team members involved in this proposal should contribute to this process. The team members should contribute to the overall discussions, critically asses other's contributions & discard them if necessary. It is about arguing & refuting the reasoning of any informal fallacies in logic. This catalyzes the evolution of a mindset required to closely scrutinize the problem from all perspectives.

Straw man proposal process

The straw man proposal can be effectively applied to different problems. For example, it can be used to address falling revenues, uncover root causes to business problems & make recommendations for improvement. The steps involved in this process are:

1. Concept proposal
2. Discussion
3. Clarification, and
4. Final Decision

Concept proposal

To address falling revenues, the consulting team may recommend introducing additional sales offices. This is the straw man proposal that form the basis of the recommendation. In this case, you may want to present your draft proposal to the rest of the team. Make sure the team understands that the intent is to use it as a conversation starter, rather than the final recommendation to the client.

Discuss

The management team subsequently discusses the concept proposal. Team members in

favor of the proposal provide detailed arguments & list all the advantages. The opponents, on the other hand, gives their objections & identify the potential shortcomings. By considering the straw man proposal a concept, all team members are free to respond & share their honest feedback. At this stage, their input has no direct impact yet. An important condition here is that the team must be aware that the proposal is merely a straw man proposal; nothing is cast in stone yet. Hence, all criticism & improvement ideas are welcome.

Clarify

Knock the straw man down. Invite feedback & criticism to create the next iteration of the proposal. Build your proposal back up again. Test the proposal against your original objectives. Collect all inputs & suggestions. Then, analyze the proposal based on its strengths & weaknesses. Subsequently, clarify the assumptions & decision-making criteria, based on which you should create a new & refined proposal.

Final decision

Finally, create a new proposal & present it to the team. You can't produce a straw man proposal in perpetuity. The aim is to arrive at the final decision / version that carries your final recommendation. This is the version the entire team should commit to. In summary, this technique is a provisional & incomplete concept that can be broken down & rebuilt. It is a continuous process that involves removing, improving, & adjusting ideas. As it is a concept, one shouldn't spend too much time on it. It is intended to spark discussion among the engagement team.

Summary

The strawman proposal is about the quantity of ideas; you shouldn't consider the quality yet. Team members should realize that it's not wise to stubbornly hold on to their thoughts & ideas. At times, they should take a step back & be receptive to other ideas. This will enhance the brainstorming experience. The idea is to attack the straw man & break it down, before the process can be improved again.