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# HOW TO CONDUCT A PRODUCTIVE BRAINSTORMING SESSION

By Rob Tonge

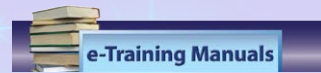


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# Brainstorming: What Is It?



## CHAPTER ONE

**B**rainstorming is the name given to a special interactive workshop technique. It involves a group of people working as a team to generate a large volume of ideas to address a specific subject such as seeking a solution to a problem or need, or developing a product, process, service or other opportunity. This technique is used by small businesses, large companies, charities, government departments and training providers.

Brainstorming is all about:

- Tapping into the creativity of the group collective.
- Generating the maximum number of ideas.
- Evaluating the ideas to determine which ones are practical and achievable.
- Formulating an action plan to implement the selected ideas.

The procedure focuses on members of the group putting forward their ideas free from criticism, building on individual ideas and identifying potential idea linkages.

Sessions are conducted in accordance with strict rules, to:

- Foster maximum creativity and spontaneity;
- Ensure the flow of ideas is not constrained; and
- Actively encourage everyone attending to participate.

Conducted effectively, brainstorming can be an important tool at any level to generate imaginative outcomes.

## WHAT MAKES A BRAINSTORMING SESSION DIFFERENT?

A brainstorming session differs from other types of group discussion techniques, for the following reasons:

- Ideas are put forward without criticism or judgement;
  - Ideas are not challenged;
  - Ideas are just listed; and
  - A time limit is set.
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Often some members of a group are reluctant to put forward their ideas for fear of looking foolish. This often results in the more confident participants imposing their point of view, irrespective of the value of this viewpoint.

A brainstorming session is designed to overcome this constraint by removing impediments to input, thereby improving the level of contribution and interaction from each person.

### **WHY IT WORKS**

Brainstorming works because as each person in the group puts forward an idea, so this stimulates the creative thinking process in other members of the group, in a competitive environment. Independent research indicates that people generate many more ideas in a group environment and activity than when striving to be creative alone.

The brainstorming process generates creative thinking and motivation, reinforced by a competitive environment for participants. Because every idea is accepted without criticism or judgement, this encourages positive attitudes and behaviour in the group. In turn, this fosters increased idea output.

### **TEN BENEFITS OF BRAINSTORMING**

- 1) Numerous ideas are generated quickly
- 2) Non-judgemental environment
- 3) Stimulates creativity
- 4) Builds on each other's ideas
- 5) Positive atmosphere
- 6) Participants are focused.
- 7) Each participant is involved
- 8) Easy to understand process
- 9) Relatively low-cost techniques
- 10) Encourages the sense of ownership



## HOW CAN BRAINSTORMING BE USED?

This technique can be used in most situations that require solving a problem, meeting a need, or investigating an opportunity or other specific issue that requires attention. Examples are:

- Planning for business development
- Planning market development
- Launching a new product
- Improving customer service
- Increasing productivity
- Improving quality control
- Improving policy and procedures
- Finding ways to develop alliances and partnerships

## HOW MANY PARTICIPANTS?

The size of groups sometimes varies from 5 to 25, or perhaps 30 people. Although larger groups provide greater opportunity for a wide range and high volume of ideas, with the larger the group the more difficult the task of facilitation, and participants can become frustrated if each person does not have sufficient time to put forward their ideas.

With a small group of just 4 – 5, control is easier, but it is usually more difficult to keep ideas flowing.

Experts recommend a group size of 5 – 12 people, with 8 – 10 participants being widely regarded as a good workable number, and 7 as a minimum.

## WORKING WITH A LARGE GROUP

Sometimes circumstances dictate working with a large group. In this situation one technique is to divide participants into small groups, each with a chairperson who is familiar with, or has been briefed on, the brainstorming process.

Each of these small groups then brainstorms the subject. When the brainstorming session has ended, each group then identifies the best idea/s and these are then presented to all the participants by the chairperson.

One negative effect of this particular technique is that judgement of the ideas is done at an early phase of the overall brainstorming process, which may result in some ideas with good potential being dropped out without giving them full consideration.

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