INNOVATION

Is Brainstorming Brain-dead?

Why Ideation Needs More Than One Tool

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Brainstorming empties the box of ideas already in the room. The most creative ideas come when very different frames of reference collide.

Does brainstorming produce creative ideas? Not likely. Is it an important part of the ideation process? Well, yes, in my experience.

First, let's consider how brainstorming is most frequently used. The process that is called "brainstorming" in many organizations is simply a session in which people are encouraged to toss out ideas. Often, they follow the ground rule of not judging the ideas immediately, but seldom use Osborn's structured method that encourages everyone to contribute an idea or pass in each round and to let the ideas run down several times before ending the process. In fact, too often the most senior or loudest voice results in ideas that are not properly critiqued or vetted before moving them forward. At times, leaders and managers end the ideation session once they hear an idea that has at least some merit or agrees with a preconceived or politically correct solution. This means that there are few or no other ideas to compete for selection as the most interesting, creative, or practical way forward.

Although it is often thought of as a creative process, brainstorming is not really a creative thinking technique. Its real purpose is to "empty the box" of ideas that have been hanging around unspoken or unremarked, so that you can then get outside of the box to explore new ideas. This is not a bad thing; good ideas walk out the door of organizations between the ears of very smart people every day. Providing a process for giving those ideas their fifteen seconds of fame is useful. However, ideation should not begin and end with brainstorming. The most creative ideas occur when two very different frames of reference intersect or collide. This is not a new conclusion; it's explored extensively in Frans Johansson's excellent book, The Medici Effect: Breakthrough Insights at the Intersection of Ideas (Harvard Business School Press, 2004). Much earlier, in The Act of Creation (Penguin, 1964), Arthur Koestler introduced the concept of bisociation: he suggested that creativity arises as a result of the intersection of two very different frames of reference. Brainstorming, when it does stimulate new ideas, is an associative process. An ideation process that combines both associative and bisociative thinking processes is likely to produce many new and interesting ideas. Below are several suggestions for designing an ideation session that takes advantage of individual thinking and encourages the collision of different ideas

and contexts. Combine several approaches and/or repeat over time and with different participants to develop a number of creative ideas in response to an innovation challenge.

- Invite a diverse group of people to participate in an ideation session. This supports the possibility of making unusual and interesting connections. At various points, have people work in smaller groups – pairs, trios, quads, to narrow or build on ideas. Change the makeup of the groups frequently.
- Have people "brainwrite" ideas on "stickies" in response to a challenge before they say anything out loud. This is a good way of making sure that interesting ideas get a hearing and also allows you to hear from the more introverted members of the group – who will have thought through their ideas more thoroughly. You can also ask people to arrive at the actual or virtual meeting with some ideas in response to the challenge.
- Use a "nominal group" technique, where each person states an idea or passes until the group has "run down" three times to ensure that all ideas have a chance to pique the interest of others; some interesting connections can be made during this process.
- Alternatively, post the notes on a wall and have people look at others' ideas, then go back and think of more of their own. Follow this with a session in which groups silently arrange the ideas into clusters with a similar theme (affinity diagram) and then add more ideas suggested by association with the themes.
- Avoid ANY judgment, including positive evaluation of ideas, at this early stage. Evaluating ideas positively, especially if the evaluation comes from a respected source, can shape thinking too early.
- Consider asking the group to frame the problem or opportunity in a number of different ways and have different groups develop ideas in response to alternative problem statements. Whenever you frame a problem or opportunity, you are framing some possible ideas or solutions in and some out.
- Use creative thinking tools that encourage bisociation between unrelated ideas and concepts. Such tools include random word, reversing assumptions, Synectics®, and many others.
- At some point – perhaps at several points - narrow to a few of the most interesting or promising options. There are many "voting" techniques that allow a group to select down based on criteria that are important to the end result.
- Following the initial ideation session, use "constructive debate" techniques to ask for and offer feedback; explore and build on or develop ideas; challenge another's or one's own rationale and assumptions. This will help to create better, more robust ideas.
- Once ideas have had time to develop, have the "idea owners" create a simple prototype and then subject them to a "Dragons' Den" type of process. In this exercise, (developed by Barnes and Francis for their program, Managing Innovation®) ideas in the form of simple prototypes are presented briefly to a group of "dragons" - potential stakeholders who ask critical, challenging questions. The owners of the ideas cannot respond except to thank the "dragons." They then take their ideas back to the drawing board to improve them as a result of the deeper questioning and challenging that comes from a critical, yet supportive mindset.

Following this approach, you will find that brainstorming is still a valuable component of any ideation process – you just can't expect it to do the whole job.

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Founder of **The Influence Guru**, Kim Barnes is a coach, facilitator, and author with more than forty years of experience in leadership, influence, and organization development. She was a founder and, for many years, CEO of Barnes & Conti Associates, and developed or co-developed programs including *Exercising Influence*, *Inspirational Leadership*, *Intelligent Risk-Taking*, *Consulting on the Inside*, and *Managing Innovation*. She is the author of six books, including *Exercising Influence* (Wiley) and *Building Better Ideas* (Berrett-Koehler). She works with enterprise companies, government agencies, small businesses, and individuals from the San Francisco Bay Area.

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