

The Failure of Brainstorming – & What to Do Instead

“Brainstorming” is a catchy phrase for a wasteful endeavor. There’s a better way to garner creative ideas.

By Meira Spivak

Brainstorming has never lived up to the hype, even from its onset. Created by Alex Osborn in 1953, the concept of getting a group together to “storm a problem” sounded good and caught on quickly. He laid out four steps that were necessary for proper brainstorming:

- 1. Defer judgment.** Let people offer ideas that aren’t judged immediately. There are no bad ideas.
- 2. Favor quantity over quality.** It’s better to come up with many lukewarm ideas than a few good ideas.
- 3. Build on the ideas of others.** Don’t negate someone’s ideas. Build on them. Say, “Yes, and . . .”
- 4. Prefer wild ideas.** The crazier and more “outside the box” the better.

Osborn’s brainchild gained widespread acceptance. But did the method work?

Only a few years later, in 1958, Yale University researchers were the first to prove that individuals working independently were more effective than groups at coming up with ideas. Many studies found the same thing – that people working alone or in pairs generated more creative ideas, often up to 85% better ones than large groups.

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Why Brainstorming Doesn’t Usually Work

There are three key reasons that Osborn’s version of brainstorming doesn’t work:

It’s unproductive. In a group setting, one person speaks and the rest sit and listen. It’s much more productive for people to work alone or in pairs and maximize the allotted time.

It breeds competition. In large group settings, people often try to undermine one another

People often feel reluctant to share their true thoughts in large groups because they fear being judged.

But people enjoyed brainstorming so much that they ignored the problems. Getting together as a group and shouting out ideas was far more fun than the usual meetings they had to sit through, so they added it to their schedules, even if it rarely offered any real breakthroughs.

Is there a way, though, to make brainstorming more effective so that we don’t have to get rid of it altogether? Luckily, the answer is “yes.”

Five Tips for Effective Brainstorming

1. Apply constraints. The common notion in classic brainstorming is to have participants throw out as many ideas as possible, the crazier the better. But research has taught that if we want to innovate, constraints are an essential part of the process.

Consider how useful constraints are to you each day. For example, you don’t assume your budget is endless; you accept budget limitations and only suggest ideas that fit within it. You don’t give the meeting a three hour window; you set a timer for 30 minutes and let the stress invigorate you. You don’t assume you can create any type of event; you imagine the event will be appropriate for elders living in Florida on low sugar diets. Constraints, though they seem to impede creativity, actually set the stage for innovation.

2. Discard bad ideas. Traditional brainstorming teaches that there are no bad ideas. Every random thought should be considered and jotted down on the whiteboard, regardless if



“Choose quality over quantity and save time.”

it has any potential. But why? Why must we list ideas that are completely unrealistic? Stop feeling good about the length of your list and start listing only good ideas. Choose quality over quantity and save yourself time and heartache later.

3. Break the group into smaller discussion subgroups.

This is key! For years we assumed that the more people we gathered together to brainstorm, the more innovation would emerge. Unfortunately this isn't the case. Research has found that five pairs of two people each yield 80% more results than a group of 10 working together. That number is truly outstanding.

Divide the large group into small, quiet breakout groups, ideally as small as two people each. After each person has had the opportunity to share in the smaller setting, bring all the groups back together for a larger group facilitation.

4. Zoom in on one aspect to brainstorm. Often when we try to innovate, we think of the topic as a huge insurmountable challenge. (Let's innovate a new type of conference, for instance. Or, let's create a new way of teaching kindergartners.) As with a camera, zoom in. Focus on one aspect instead of the entire project. (Try innovating the meals at the conference or the seating for the keynote speaker. Try innovating your kindergartners' homework system or the in-person drop off.) By narrowing in on a piece of the program, you'll see a new perspective and feel less overwhelmed.

5. Have people put their ideas on paper. Writing things down is better than asking everyone to call out ideas, because many individuals are self-conscious, shy, or afraid to look foolish, so they don't speak up. Only a few people's ideas got noticed when you rely on hearing people's shouts in a big group.

Because writing ideas down is so useful, this more effective version of brainstorming is often called "brainwriting." Here's how it works:

Hand out pieces of paper, and give people 10 minutes to attempt innovation. Then, have each person share their favorite ideas with the group. Place the best ideas on the board. This method gives everyone an equal opportunity to share and will produce a wider, stronger representation of ideas. 

A seasoned speaker, Meira Spivak (meiraspivak.com) is known for motivating her audiences to take action. She teaches techniques in structured creativity using the SIT (systematic inventive thinking) method, which has helped hundreds of organizations reach creative solutions to pressing problems (see "The Quickest Path to Almost Everything" on this page).

The Quickest Path to Almost Everything

SIT (systematic inventive thinking) is a technique that helps you break "fixedness" – the tendency to see things only in the accustomed way. It's based on the idea that inventive solutions share common patterns, or templates, and by using those templates, you can be creative time and again.

Let's use cars as examples of how it works:

Subtraction: Look at your problem or the feature you're trying to improve, and mentally remove one part of it. For example, you might take the seats out of a van to turn it from a passenger vehicle to one configured for hauling equipment, thus serving two markets.

Division: Divide an existing feature into parts and then reconfigure the elements in a novel way. For instance, auto designers offer the option of a radio you can remove from the vehicle for security reasons.

Multiplication: Copy a component of the existing product or system but change it in a counterintuitive way. Auto companies, for example, add a second drive axle to a two-wheel-drive car to turn it into an all-wheel-drive car, thereby satisfying two distinct markets.

Task Unification: Give an additional responsibility to a product component. Unify tasks that previously worked independently of one another. For instance, car companies add a warning-flasher switch to the standard lights so that all the lights flash at once in an emergency.

Attribute Dependency: Think of ways to make connections between the attributes of a component and the environment. Consider, for example, how auto companies add a light-sensing component to your car so your lights will turn on automatically at night or on a dark, rainy day.

Lessons Learned

Discover other lessons we've learned about creativity by reading these articles, available at [NonprofitWorld.org](https://www.nonprofitworld.org):

Spark New Ideas throughout Your Organization (Vol. 39, No. 2)

Not Taught in Business Schools: How to Cultivate Creative Leading (Vol. 24, No. 5)

Six Ways to Get Out of a Rut (Vol. 24, No. 4)

Creating a Climate for Innovation (Vol. 29, No. 4)

Outside the Comfort Zone (Vol. 25, No. 3)

Seven Ways to Be Unreasonable (Vol. 20, No. 5)

Making Much of Little: Turning Untapped Assets into Gold (Vol. 36, No. 1)

Mind Mapping Is Essential for Leaders (Vol. 38, No. 4)

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