

Ditch Brainstorming – Try Brainwriting Instead

This new take on idea generation works like magic.

When people are looking for creative solutions, brainstorming is the tool they turn to most often. We all know the drill: Get together and let the thoughts run wild while building on each other's ideas.

Why is brainstorming so popular? One reason is the widespread notion that grouping people together is always more effective than letting participants work in isolation. On a first look that makes sense, but is it really so?

Recent research shows otherwise. Several studies have tested brainstorming teams and found that participants working in isolation outperformed those in groups, both in quantity and quality of ideas generated.

The Shortcomings of Brainstorming

The fact is that brainstorming, the way it's carried out, has some fundamental shortcomings that are hard to overcome. Here are the top three reasons why brainstorming usually isn't as effective as you might think:

1. Blocking: This is the number-one deficiency in traditional brainstorming: Only one person can speak at a time.

The problem lies in the fact that our short-term memory can't effectively develop new ideas while keeping old ones in active storage. If we must wait for others to describe their ideas before we can announce ours, we'll end up judging or editing our thoughts – or even forgetting them altogether.

Not surprisingly, this makes all the difference in our idea output. Even when we do get a chance to describe an idea, we may get to offer only one or two comments before someone else breaks in. The larger the brainstorming group, the bigger the amount of "blocked" participants, and the fewer the ideas produced compared to an equal number of people generating ideas independently.

2. Fear of Judgment: Some group members avoid expressing what they consider to be wild ideas based on how the other members will privately judge them.

“This is the number-one deficiency in brainstorming.”

"Suspend judgment!" "Be wild and outrageous!" "Speak with no fear!": Such advice is hard to take when you're in the company of an authority figure – or of anyone whose opinion matters to you.

Despite the soundness of the advice to let ideas run wild, the truth is that many groups aren't mature or prepared enough to follow it. "Maybe my idea" – they think – "will be seen as way off the mark, so why take any chances?"

3. Personality Face-Off: Brainstorming sessions can easily become an arena of clashing human personalities. True, diversity is a necessary part of effective brainstorming, but it also makes fertile ground for all sorts of unproductive behavior.

Examples? Overpowering people trying to dominate the session. Passive people speaking the minimum possible to get by unnoticed. Stubborn people getting overprotective about their ideas and not accepting others'. Fearful people being reticent and only presenting safe ideas. The list goes on and on.

The bottom line is that personality differences, if not dealt with appropriately, can harm more than help problem-solving.

Enter Brainwriting

If brainstorming groups are usually outperformed by individuals working alone, should we quit forming brainstorming groups? Not necessarily.

Traditional brainstorming pales in comparison with a technique called brainwriting. Brainwriting can easily lead to more than double the ideas generated in a typical brainstorming session. Also, it's not as tricky as brainstorming to work well for you.

In brainwriting, as in traditional brainstorming, people come together to tackle a problem. The difference is that in brainwriting each participant thinks and records ideas individually, without any verbal interaction. As we'll see, this small change results in a fundamental difference in idea-generation effectiveness.

“What does this small change accomplish?”

Here's how a successful brainwriting session works:

1. Participants sit around a table and each person gets a sheet of paper with the same problem statement written at the top.

2. As in traditional brainstorming, you need a moderator for the session. At the moderator's signal, each participant has three minutes to write down three ideas. As in traditional brainstorming, the ideas should always go unedited. The difference is that now they're being recorded in private. The number of ideas and duration can vary, but "three ideas every three minutes" works especially well.

3. When time is up (or when everybody's done), each participant passes the sheet of paper to the person to the left.

4. People read each other's ideas, and a new three-minute round starts. Each participant again comes up with three new ideas and writes them down. Participants are free to use the ideas already on the sheet as triggers – or to ignore them altogether.

5. Lather, rinse, repeat. The group can agree to stop after a fixed number of rounds (such as when sheets come to a full turn around the table) or when participants feel that contributions are exhausted.

6. After the idea-gathering phase is completed, the ideas are read, discussed, and consolidated with the help of the moderator, just as in traditional brainstorming.

Why Does This Work So Well?

So, what does this small change of having the ideas written, instead of spoken, accomplish?

The amount of ideas gathered can be amazing. Since ideas are generated simultaneously, participants never get to block or dominate each other. With everyone coming up with three ideas every three minutes, a group of five people can produce 100 ideas in 20 minutes. And here are some other reasons why it works so well:

Participants still get to cross-pollinate and build on each other's ideas. That is, they still get the benefits of brainstorming while avoiding its shortcomings.

Ideas are recorded the moment you get them. No ideas are lost while you wait for a chance to speak.

No one gets overshadowed, and everybody contributes equally, regardless of personality type or personal agenda.

Ideas are contributed in private so that there's no fear of being openly judged by others.

Everyone's given a clear task: to fulfill a specific idea quota in a specific time frame. The quota adds an element of healthy pressure that can help unlock creativity, as it can be seen as a fun challenge.

To be fair, there are ways to make traditional brainstorming work better. However, brainwriting usually generates many more ideas, and it's way easier to get it right. 

LEARN MORE

Additional Resources

Recommended by LiteMind

Mycoted Brainwriting Page (mycoted.com/brainwriting) is an amazing online resource of creativity techniques (make sure to check their index page). The brainwriting page has several interesting variations of the technique. Highly recommended.

Michael Michalko's book Cracking Creativity

(penguinrandomhouse.com) is an impressive resource. It has a great wealth of thinking and creativity techniques, including brainwriting.

MindMeister mind-mapping tool (mindmeister.com) is the top tool for web-based, real-time, collaborative mind mapping. Even though it wasn't specifically designed to support brainwriting, it works very well for that purpose.



Helpful Articles from Nonprofit World (NonprofitWorld.org):

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

Risk & Your Brain (Vol. 38, No. 4)

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Why You Need Deeper Knowledge – & How to Get It (Vol. 42, No. 1)

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