

The Art of Brainstorming: Getting The Best From Your Group's Collective Thinking

by Patrick J. McKenna

There will undoubtedly be times during your tenure as a practice group leader when you will be called upon to set a direction for your group, enter a new market, help improve your group's profitability, enhance the quality of service provided clients, or have the responsibility for solving some challenging internal problem.

As practice leader you may be tempted to just simply proceed to think through your options and take action on your own. A wise practice leader knows intuitively that the degree to which you involve other members of your group broadens the input, fosters even more ideas, and gains energy and buy-in to the solutions, from the people you are going to want to involve in helping you implement those ideas.

As Linus Pauling, the Nobel Prize-winning scientist was known to have once said: "The best way to get good ideas is to get lots of ideas – and throw the bad ones away." And the best way for you to generate a lot of ideas is known as "Brainstorming;" a method for getting a large number of ideas from your group in a relatively short time. Brainstorming follows a process of generating as many ideas as possible without stopping to evaluate them.

The only problem with brainstorming . . . everyone *thinks* they already know how to do it.

Indeed, a survey conducted by one of the top accounting firms disclosed that 70% of businesspeople claimed to use brainstorming within their organizations. However, that same survey then went on to reveal that 76% of those who used brainstorming, admitted that they engage in brainstorming rather infrequently – less than once a month. From my experience in a wide variety of professional firms, I would be willing to bet that the frequency of brainstorming, in firms like yours, is even lower.

I am constantly amazed at how few firms actively engage in continual brainstorming with their people and how many of those that do, think it a fairly trivial, low-level exercise. I'm convinced that those who think brainstorming rather mundane, have come to that conclusion largely because they either fail to generate many ideas during their brainstorming sessions (forgetting that quantity trumps quality), or they have a tendency to stop the process once having heard, what they believe to be, the first good ideas.

What many practice leaders fail to take into account is that brainstorming is an art that improves over time with constant usage. You are always learning. At IDEO, the world's leading design consultancy, general manager Tom Kelley claims that brainstorming is

practically a religion, one their firm practices every day. Kelley says, “Most people are familiar with the fundamentals – like sticking to one conversation at a time and building on the ideas of others – but it takes extra effort if you want a great brainstorm with valuable results.”

Planning Your Session

One of the first things you want to determine is whether indeed you need to conduct a brainstorming session at all. As mentioned, brainstorming should be used when you need to generate lots of new ideas and solutions. It need not be used for analysis or for decision making. You may need to analyze and judge your group’s ideas but this is done afterwards.

If you decide to proceed with brainstorming, one of your firm’s meeting rooms may work for most sessions. However, if you are having the group focus on some important strategic topic, you may want to get out of the office altogether, in order to avoid having professionals being constantly subjected to unwanted interrupted. Everyone should be given a notepad so that they can write down those thoughts that occur to them while in the thick of hearing ideas shouted out by other colleagues.

Again, if your topic is strategic in nature, or would benefit from having a creative flow or broader range of ideas then might be available from just the members of your practice team, you may want to consider also including people from different backgrounds. You could invite colleagues from other areas of your firm, clients who could offer some interesting insights, or those from other professions or academics who have relevant but different experiences with the topic under consideration.

Finally, you need to decide who will facilitate your brainstorming session. This individual should introduce the session, keep an eye on time, and ensure the brainstorming guidelines are observed. Their job is to facilitate the session, see that it runs smoothly, and insure that the participants feel comfortable and join in the process. They will also be responsible for restarting the creative process if it slows down. The facilitator doesn’t have to be you as the practice leader, but whoever it is should be well versed in running your group’s brainstorming session.

Leading Your Brainstorming Session

A brainstorming process can go a long way to tapping the imagination and creativity of your group. Those who may be concerned that such a creative activity will lack substance can be assured that the process merely creates a more imaginative menu and that the subsequent ordering from that menu will be executed with wisdom and discernment.

If all agree to be highly disciplined about getting to potential action ideas and refraining from engaging in lengthy discussions and debates, you can devote about forty minutes to each topic you choose to have the group focus on.

In some professions, such as management consulting and public relations, the brainstorming process is quite comfortable. Many of these practitioners employ the process in their work with their own clients. In other professions such as law and accounting, some have experienced brainstorming, but it is not a common activity.

Here are the sequential steps that you need to follow:

STEP 1: INTRODUCTION:

You should commence your brainstorming exercise by addressing a few basic questions that are likely preoccupying the minds of your team members. You need only spend about 10 minutes on this, but it is important that you give the members of your group a context within which to support your asking them to participate. Here are the questions you need to address:

- *Why is this an important (opportunity or problem) for us to work on?*

Start by composing a well-honed statement which describes the opportunity or problem that you want your group to concentrate on, and what you are trying to achieve. This statement should never suggest what a likely solution might be, as that would only serve to hinder your group's ideas. Define the problem or opportunity clearly before you start to brainstorm.

In some instances you may want to get your group's input on "what is the real problem here?" You may well discover that the issue you've identified is really part of a bigger problem and, subsequently, deserves to be broken into smaller pieces, so that each piece can be tackled incrementally.

You need to let your group know what will happen if "we" are able to take advantage of this opportunity or solve this problem.

"We want as many ideas as possible from everyone on how we could develop an even stronger relationship with this client. We need to solidify our relationships now as a number of our competitors are making some aggressive moves to nurture getting this client's work. And the loss of this client would adversely impact our group significantly."

Frame the task and make sure everyone understands the goal of your brainstorming exercise.

- *What, historically, is important for our group to know?*

Briefly provide only the truly critical information.

"I need to let all of you know that this client has already received a written proposal from one of our competitors and invitations to lunch from

another. And unfortunately, you will remember that they were not over-the-top on the last project we did for them. We need some immediate remedial action.”

- *How will decisions be made as a result of this brainstorming?*

Your group members need to know in advance, if the ideas generated from their brainstorming are simply for your consideration as practice leader, or are the ideas going to undergo review and selection by the group itself. You need to manage their expectations for the outcome of their efforts.

- *What do you, as the practice leader, hope to achieve from this effort?*

You need to define your hopes for the group’s exercise.

“I’m looking for you to generate a minimum of 40 ideas from which I’m hopeful that we will have a few great ideas to further review and refine.”

The intent of this introduction is to provide just enough information to stimulate the brainstorming, without overloading or constraining your team.

STEP 2: REVIEW THE BRAINSTORMING GROUND RULES

Before you even commence generating ideas, it helps to have some ground rules. With groups of highly educated professionals, our natural propensity is to enjoy engaging in lengthy intellectual discussions, while exercising our natural gift for being highly critical and analytical. This critical and analytical propensity is most often manifested within professional environments through some participant shooting a “zinger” at some other member’s idea.

Fostering a “No Zingers Allowed” atmosphere requires that professionals learn to recognize the subtle (and sometimes not-so-subtle) behaviors that impede effective brainstorming. In most situations, building this awareness is all that may be needed to significantly reduce zinger-type behavior.

The spirit of any brainstorming session can make it or break it. Here are a few of the more common zinger-type behaviors:

- **Verbal Put-Downs.** It is a common occurrence within professional firms to experience a meeting where shooting-down ideas is the routine behavior. The put-down can vary from a lighthearted jest that provokes group laughter to the deadly serious comment that embarrasses. The action may be completely unintentional, but even the zinger accidentally fired does significant damage. Few ideas survive in a take-no-prisoners approach to brainstorming.

Meanwhile, defending oneself against some so-called harmless remark only serves to get you labeled as being overly sensitive (Whimp!). The consequence then becomes a “revenge ploy”, where at the first opportunity, we blast others’ ideas in retaliation. Everyone plays the zingers game, and the ability to generate any meaningful ideas is now lost.

- **The Unintended Idea Killer.** One important objective for any practice leader is to instill enthusiasm. It becomes difficult to accomplish when we unthinkingly fall into the habit of liberally using the term "but" within our normal conversations. It may not be unusual to hear someone say to one of their colleagues; "That’s a good idea, but what I think we should do is . . ." Now how enthusiastic would you feel being on the other end of that statement? You need to have your team avoid this "great . . . but" mode of communication. It takes a conscious effort to remove the buts, but an effort that pays dividends.

- **Non Verbal Put-Downs.** We all know that words are not the only way we communicate. As one experienced facilitator expressed it, “A new idea is delicate; it can be killed by a sneer or a yawn, or worried to death by a frown on the right person’s brow.” Negative inflections and facial expressions can easily communicate criticism of any new idea. Between the victims who retreat into their shells and the ones who refocus on retaliating, it takes but minutes to move a brainstorming exercise completely off track.

One other consequence of either verbal or non-verbal zingers is for wounded individuals to shut down and stop contributing ideas. (At this moment, as you read these words, somewhere in a professional firm, there is a practice group meeting happening where the most astonishing idea has occurred to someone. It started as a crazy thought but as the meeting progressed, it got more and more brilliant. But that professional chose to remain silent and the idea is lost forever.)

It is therefore imperative that you have your group agree upon some sensible ground rules before they begin. Now fortunately, you need not come across as an ogre or concern yourself with devising those rules, as there are already some commonly accepted guidelines for brainstorming. Your task then, as the facilitator, is merely to review these guidelines and ask for everyone’s agreement to either modify or behave in accordance with the rules.

You might explain that the ideas your group members are being asked for are both to serve as possible solutions, but also to stimulate the ideas of others. Therefore, you need to tell them that you will be expecting bizarre, weird, strange and impossible ideas, that may not in the final analysis be so strange. And are highly likely to spark more workable solutions.

The accepted rules for this brainstorming activity are usually some variation on the following:

- 1 - Say everything that comes to mind.

Yes, I know that you were schooled to think before you open your mouth. This is going to take a bit of an adjustment. Ideas should be advanced both as solutions and also as a basis to spark others. Even seemingly absurd ideas can spark off better ones. It is important to emphasize to your group that the 'wilder' the idea the better. Shout out bizarre and unworkable ideas to see what they spark off. No idea is too ridiculous. Remember that your objective is to go for quantity of ideas; and narrow down the list later. All activities should be geared towards extracting as many ideas as possible in a given period of time. Tom Kelley at IDEO finds that “a hundred ideas per hour usually indicates a good, fluid brainstorming session.”

2 - No discussion.

Many professionals have this tendency to put everything they say into a discussion sandwich: first they present the general concept, then they give you the idea, then they rationalize why that was a good idea. You need to have your group members avoid their stories, discussions, and elaboration on how the idea could be done or how great it might be.

You also want to ask the team to refrain from side whispers. It is crucial that everyone stay focused on the ideas that are being tossed out. Allowing side conversations to develop simply distracts and disrupts the process.

A further area of caution is in dealing with the “verbose energy killer.” You group is gathered for a brainstorm. Everyone is being encouraged to offer up ideas. One of your members begins to offer their idea and we have all experienced the endless rambler. This professional goes on and on in presenting their idea until eventually they have sucked the energy right out of the room. Some people just seem genetically incapable of keeping it short.

As the facilitator, you need to encourage and enforce everyone keeping it succinct!

3 - Make no value-judgment comments, either positive or negative.

It is often helpful to remind your people of the three questions that successful entrepreneurs adopt when confronting a new idea: how do I make this work?, what's the worst that could happen?, and where is my back door (exit) if the worst that could happen actually happens? Then remind them of the usual response among professionals to any new idea: Not a nano-second passes before we hear thirteen reasons why that isn't going to work.

4 - Record all comments so that they can be seen and get down lots of ideas;

Keep in mind that your objective here is quantity not quality. And if Janice gives you an idea and you write it down, and then Chuck gives you an idea and you

don't record it, Chuck is probably thinking either I guess my idea wasn't good enough or why kind of idiot facilitator is this!

It is also critical to capture peoples' words using exactly the phraseology that was just spoken. Changing the phrasing can change the meaning. (It can also annoy the person who offered the idea.) To assist in the accurate recording of ideas, ask participants to start with a headline that encapsulates their key thought in a single crisp sentence. They can then go on to elaborate, while the recorder writes down their idea. (This also allows others to hear the central thought, make connections of their own during the elaboration, and come up with the next headlined idea.)

If the headline goes on too long and you lose your colleagues exact words, try to paraphrase what he or she said, but be sure to go back and make sure that you've got the idea recorded correctly.

5 - Encourage participation and build on each other's ideas.

Build and expand on the ideas of others. Think and link. Use other people's ideas as inspiration. Combine several suggested ideas to explore new possibilities.

One of the great myths associated with brainstorming is . . . people think that they will recognize a good idea when they see it. The truth is that it is extremely rare that a breakthrough new idea is recognized for its brilliance when first uttered. New ideas almost always are flawed in some way when they first appear. Or as Albert Einstein once put it, "If at first a new idea doesn't seem totally absurd, there is no hope for it."

Step 3: IDENTIFY THE PERSON WHO WILL ACT AS NOTE-TAKER.

Prepare to record ideas and appoint a recorder to do so. The facilitator and the note-taker should not be the same person. As the facilitator, you may choose to help the note-taker if the ideas are coming fast and furious, but you do not want to hold up the idea flow by trying to concentrate on what has just been said while also writing on the flipchart.

The recorder is responsible to write ideas rapidly on (paper) flipchart pages; number each idea to provide for easily jumping back and forth from idea to idea without losing track of where you are; and number the flipcharts, and then tape completed pages to the wall keeping them in order. The recorder must also record *every* idea or comment. Even seemingly outrageous points should be noted. The recorder must never act as editor!

Now for something completely schoolmarmish: legibility. Though it may seem of little importance, scribing good notes is a critical part of your brainstorming process. Not only are they the only collective record of what happened, but the clarity of the note-taking contributes to the development of the thinking that takes place during the session.

STEP 4: WARM-UP.

If necessary familiarize your group with the procedures by engaging them in a practice exercise. This may be advisable if your group has not worked together before or the group has not brainstormed on a frequent basis.

As a warm up activity, you might start off with a brief artificial exercise. Ask them to: “suggest thirty new ideas for an entertaining television program.” Any topic that is fun and stimulating (but not work related) will get people into the right “mood” for creatively participating. After warming up for about 5 to 10 minutes, you should reintroduce your main topic for brainstorming.

STEP 5: BEGIN TO GENERATE IDEAS.

You might initially start by allowing your team members two minutes to think about and write down their ideas. Some may think fast, while others more slowly. Some may be overly influenced by the position, seniority or perceived expertise of other participants. Giving the group a few minutes to think individually can greatly enhance the number and quality of ideas generated.

Formally begin your session by asking for as many ideas and suggestions as possible. If the group seems hesitant, call on someone you know who is likely to respond positively, to offer the first idea.

Monitor adherence to the agreed-upon brainstorming rules. In spite of agreeing to abide by the brainstorming rules, you must be watchful to quell anyone’s natural tendency to want to comment, criticize or evaluate any of the ideas being presented. I have personally seen facilitators who choose to use some “noisemaker” like a coaches whistle or a hand bell to remind participants when they get overzealous. One small shortcoming . . . I think that technique leaves all of the responsibility with the practice leader or facilitator. Personally, I would recommend that you give the group the tools, authority and encouragement to police each other.

At one particular firm where sarcasm is a cultural norm we adopted a football analogy to deal with partners that trampled on one another or on someone’s new idea. During a football match, players who commit a foul are shown different color cards by the referee to indicate the seriousness of the offence. In this group I gave each of the participants two colored cards and encouraged them to adopt a similar football language in their brainstorming session. The first foul is a yellow card to indicate a “warning”. A further offence gets a second “warning.” Thereafter, any subsequent offences or a particularly negative comment gets a red card signifying a “penalty”, which is usually of a monetary nature. It is done playfully, but there is a real serious intent behind it.

Encourage people to write their ideas down Something interesting occurs as we listen to our colleagues giving out their ideas. While we are listening, we are generating ideas of our own. If we don't write these ideas down, they are many times more likely to disappear than ever get shared with the group.

Psychologists have concluded that people can only remember a few thoughts at a time before the memory starts erasing the old data and replacing it with new input. Consequently without a place to store more ideas (like on a pad of paper) we either shut down in order to hold onto what's in our heads, or we lose one stored idea for every new one we add.

Be encouraging. Keep telling them how well they are doing when they come up with new ideas, especially when the idea is rather novel. Thank them for contributing their idea.

- **GENERATING IDEAS - VARIATION ONE: FOR SENSITIVE TOPICS**

There are likely to be those times when you want your group to brainstorm and contribute their candid ideas to resolving a particularly sensitive issue where you expect that people may be reluctant to speak freely.

As a slight variation, give everyone a pad of twenty 8 x 14 cm cards. Ask your group to write down as many ideas as they can within five to ten minutes – each one on a separate card. Have the group turn-in their cards to you. Shuffle the pack and give the cards out again. Ask each person to build at least two more ideas on the ones written on the cards they received. Have the group turn-in their cards to you again. Shuffle the pack and give the cards out once more. Now have the people who received the cards read out the ideas contained on each card.

- **GENERATING IDEAS - VARIATION TWO: TRASHY BRAINSTORMING**

Even with ultra-serious, button-down professionals there may be a particular opportunity or problem that you would just like to see your colleagues get a bit crazy with. At some point you could simply ask for weird ideas and any ideas which just spring to mind for no apparent reason. (It helps if you can model some absurd thinking with a wild idea of your own.) Or, you might want to stimulate the group with another variation on conventional brainstorming, designed to create lots of laughter and energy.

Ask each of your colleagues to come up with their most absurd, worst possible idea that addresses the opportunity or problem. Encourage your group to come up with ideas that are illegal, immoral, or might get them fired for being offered outside of the meeting room. Give them a couple of minutes to legibly write their one awful idea on a clean sheet of paper. Ask people to take turns reading out their horrible idea to the group. Agree that it is perfectly awful and ask the professional to crunch it up and throw it into your waste paper basket. Time permitting and after you have gone through hearing from

a number of your group, tell them all to throw their trashy ideas in your waste basket. Now recycle that waste!

Pass the basket around and ask each participant to remove one trashy idea (obviously not their own). Now ask the group:

“How can you turn this into a good idea? Is there something of value in it?
Can you find a reverse or opposite of this idea that might work?”

Allow each of your colleagues to read out their trashy idea and then the idea that might be worthwhile, sparked by the trashy idea. The benefit of this variation is that it allows the members of your group to stretch, have fun and be creative, with little fear of ridicule. It can't hurt to remind ourselves of Oscar Wilde's admonition: “an idea that is not dangerous is unworthy of being called an idea at all.”

STEP 6: MANAGE THE SILENCE

You will find that the brainstorming session will go through phases of very rapid idea generation, and then through slow awkward times when no ideas are being created. Try to highlight this as natural.

In brainstorming, great ideas rarely come from a single flash of inspiration. The raw ideas need to be built and developed. This slow time is when you should return to the ideas listed on your flipchart pads. Pick an interesting one and put that to the group asking them to expand, modify or remodel it.

Play the “**What If**” Game. Have your group *build upon* their earlier ideas. This is a worthwhile exercise following the first burst of your group's brainstorming. What If is a series of provocative statements designed to challenge the group's current perspectives. For example:

- What if some parameter were increased four-fold?
- What if some factor was decreased in half?
- What if this same situation was being approached in a different profession, industry, or country?
- What if this same situation were being faced by a particular famous person?
- What if we could eliminate a portion of the problem?
- What if we could find a new way to deliver our service?
- What if we could substitute automation for labor-intensive effort?
- What if we could have clients do certain steps for themselves?
- What if we could eliminate the paper?
- What if we could deliver with greater speed?
- What if we could combine two related services?
- What if we could make dealing with us more enjoyable?
- What if we did nothing?

These questions are intended as deliberate acts of provocation.

If your group again falls silent, allow the silence to continue for a full two minutes. This maintains time pressure as well as giving an opportunity for the individual's mind to work.

Take a break. After a period your group will have exhausted their ideas for a while and will need a break. Depending on the time you have allocated to the session and depending on the number of ideas generated, you should ask them to break. If you are taking a mid-session break, get people to move about, chat with others and relax. Encourage them to look through the flipcharts of ideas. When the break is over ask people to sit in a different place, then ask for their further ideas.

Change the process if you find things drying up. Divide the professionals into small groups around different flipchart pads and have them just brainstorm as a break-out team around the ideas on that pad. Then they can move on to the next grouping of flipcharts.

Introduce random words or pictures. Sometimes all it takes is an unusual image or headline to get your brain working. If you're in the middle of a brainstorming session and hit a point where no one has anything to say, rip out some pages from a variety of magazines and hand them around your working group. By forcing a connection (any connection) between the content on the page and the task that people are working on, you can generate a few ideas that will get others, making more connections.

There are few people who have participated in brainstorming sessions who have not experienced "brain-chain reaction" – when minds are really warmed up, and a spark from one mind will light up a lot of others. Association of ideas comes in to play, so that an idea put into words stirs your imagination towards another idea, while at the same time it stimulates associative connections in other people's minds – often at a subconscious level.

The overnight effect. It has been demonstrated that not more than 40 minutes should be allocated to having participants brainstorm any one particular topic. But we also know that sometimes great ideas occur to us after the formal session has ended. You could have people simply send in any ideas that occur to them.

One important reason for not trying to do all your brainstorming in a prolonged session is that you will miss out on the benefit of one critical success factors – the "Overnight Effect." This is a simple yet powerful, psychological phenomenon that dramatically improves the quality of the output from any brainstorming process.

The ability of your group to generate great ideas will grow exponentially if you build at least one unstructured overnight into your session – so that your afternoon meeting flows over to the next morning. During that overnight period, people's minds always operate in a relaxed concentration mode. Bits of information come together and new connections are formed.

All of us have experienced the overnight effect usually without realizing it. We have gone to bed thinking about a situation and presto, in the morning shower a great idea dawns on us. Thus you should always start the session on the following morning by asking group members for their overnight thoughts. I've seen some of the best ideas come forth from those morning debriefings.

STEP 7: HELP PEOPLE MAKE THEIR IDEAS ACTIONABLE

You must be vigilant in ensuring that the ideas expressed are specific, doable, and can be implemented. Sounds easy, but it's not. In my experience, this is the most difficult step in the brainstorming process. As professionals, we are naturally prone to expressing concepts or goals, and often find it difficult to transform those concepts into actions.

For example, a couple of common concepts you might here are things like: "I think that we should always make a point of visiting our clients at their place of business." Or; "we should improve communications."

As concepts, these are good. The only small hurdle then becomes "how?" How will we ensure that everyone does this? How will we know that it is happening?

As the facilitator, you must always ask yourself, as these ideas surface: "Is this proposed idea specific, tangible and quantitative enough (or is it merely a goal, concept, or objective)?" For example, could some member of our group delegate this idea to a junior for implementation such that the junior would know exactly what initial action should be taken?

It also helps to think in terms of the tangible outcome (or "deliverable") that will be presented at the next meeting to evidence the implementation of this idea. Will this involve doing some research (a report); developing a policy, procedure, checklist or template; or taking some specific action that can be shown to have occurred?

Where ideas do not measure up to these criteria, you might want to gently encourage more specifics. Ask a question to elicit more detail, *without discussion*. For example, you might say to the individual:

“Janice, that idea would no doubt be very helpful to you and the group. Could you expand upon it to help us determine how we could ensure that everyone in our group was doing this consistently and how we would know that it was happening?”

Take a moment to explore with Janice (asking other group members to contribute) how you could do this. By gently probing for more specifics, you may likely elicit something like:

“Well, we could develop a wall-chart that would display a list of our top twenty clients down the vertical column and the members of our group

along the horizontal. We could then initiate a system whereby each of us took responsibility to visit one client over the next quarter and note on the chart the date that client was visited and submit a one-paragraph report to the group on our findings.”

Or; “I guess one of the tangible things we could do to improve our communications, is start a weekly internal newsletter.”

Now you have something specific. The group will be able to assess for itself, at any point, how far along with this action plan they have progressed. Have the top twenty clients been identified? Has the wall-chart been developed? Has a visitation plan been drafted? Have client visits been made and reports submitted? The facilitator's job is to ensure that he or she has helped the group generate a good list of very specific, tangible, quantitative and implementable ideas for moving toward their objectives.

Is this basic? Yes! Does it work? Yes! Do all groups do it? No! (Does yours?)

STEP 8: ANALYZE YOUR IDEAS

You should now have a large number of ideas scattered about on sequentially numbered flipchart pages. Technically, your brainstorming session is over and the analysis process must begin. The analysis, selection and implementation of your ideas is an important step.

If you should intend to end your group's session at this point, you will want to transcribe the notes on these flip charts for distribution to your team. Upon transcribing these notes, you should do so in exactly the same page format as they were originally recorded. When you distribute your group's work back to the individual members for further brainstorming, analysis, or implementation, you will find it very helpful to have the notes in a format that reminds them of how your brainstorming session progressed.

If you are going to proceed to the analysis stage, the very first thing that you should do as a group is to remove any duplicative ideas and also combine any ideas which are really saying the same thing.

You might then begin your analysis, by having your group brainstorm your criteria for evaluating your various ideas. Label a new flipchart with: "A good idea would have to have the following characteristics" Your criteria might include characteristics like greatest potential for positively impacting the practice group's profitability; most attractive to our existing clients; most novel and likely to differentiate; and other such factors.

You may have already determined your criteria before beginning your brainstorming session, and if so, you should disclose the criteria to the group. Ask them if your criteria makes sense or if they can see anything you have missed.

One of your challenges at this stage is to discern whether you are more attracted to selecting ideas for their *feasibility* - thus taking advantage of achieving some quick successes; or selecting ideas for their *newness* -thus enhancing your chances for a possible innovation breakthrough. (This is where your initial statement describing what you were trying to achieve with your brainstorming efforts, should guide you.)

My experience with this feasibility / newness conundrum is that the newer and more innovative the idea, the more difficult it will be to realize. It creates for many groups a feasibility / newness schizophrenia where our natural tendency is to gravitate to those ideas that are highly feasible. Now if your brainstorming efforts were inwardly focused, intent on solving some existing problem, then feasibility and quick successes makes perfect sense. However, if your brainstorming efforts were externally-focused and intended to generate new ideas for differentiating your group, surpassing the competition, or developing a new service, then newness may be of higher priority.

By way of example, I once had a gathering of 42 professionals, brainstorming in groups of 7, in various break-out rooms. One of the criteria we decided on was that if more than one of the 6 groups generated the same idea, it was to be discarded. We often think that the duplication of an idea validates its brilliance. How often have you heard the old notion, "great minds think alike?" But if you are really intent on stimulating innovation, differentiation, and wealth-creating initiatives as we were in this session, then we must except the fact that great minds have different ideas. It is only lemmings who think alike. After all, if this group of 42 professionals were largely thinking of the same ideas, aren't the chances high that their competitors were already working on those ideas?

Once having developed your list of criteria, you will want to prioritize them. Ideally you may want to determine the two most important factors. Depending on the number of ideas that have been generated, you have a couple of optional ways of approaching the analysis stage.

- *If you have 50 ideas or less:*

On an easel pad, draw a 2 x 2 matrix. The vertical axis could be labeled "Feasibility" with "easy" at the bottom and "difficult" at the top. The horizontal axis could then be labeled with something like "ROI" showing "low" at the left and "high" at the right.

You can experiment with whatever other terms suit your most important factors for the axis. "Feasibility" might be changed to "speed" or "effort" or "cost." "ROI" might be changed to "excitement" or "value" or "potential." (You might even construct two different matrices and include one that measures "Newness". Then compare and contrast the ideas after you have placed them on each matrix.)

Have your group agree that you're going to use this matrix just to conduct a rough evaluation of each idea. This is not the time for lengthy debate on every idea; so as rapidly as possible, place your ideas into the matrix in a way that reflects the general agreement of the group.

If there are too many ideas to put on the chart, have everyone pick their one personal favorite and place that one in. Identify only those ideas that generate the highest rating and take those ideas forward for implementation.

• *If you have more than 50 ideas:*

If you have a particularly lengthy list of ideas, have your group work through them and quickly arrange them into three color-coded categories. Your three *feasibility* categories could be:

- Green: Definitely will work and can be implemented immediately.
- Yellow: Will possibly work but may require further analysis.
- Red: Needs much more investigating. May work in the future. Park for now.

Or you may choose to have categories like:

- Green: Just-do-it's because they contain elements of newness and feasibility.
- Yellow: Very exciting incremental improvements.
- Red: Breakthrough ideas, but representing some risk in time and resources.

When you have the lists you should plan to implement the best of the Green ideas and to investigate the Yellow ones. Don't discard the Red ideas. Just let them percolate with the group for some further thinking.

Finally, once you have your short list selected of the best ideas for your group to focus on implementing, you can even take it one further step. I worked with one team who, after a rather productive brainstorming and analysis session, then devoted time to "reverse-brainstorming" their best ideas. That is, they spent time thinking through together "in how many ways can this idea fail?" Sound like overkill? This group didn't think so and their results reinforced taking the extra step.

DOUBLE-BARRELED BRAINSTORMING

This is a brainstorming variation that is particularly useful when you want to involve your team members in working through their ideas with respect to a new strategy or change that may impact your group's practice.

Left Barrel: **Positive**

Right Barrel: **Negative**

1. Ideal Improvements to the Plan **2.** Feasible Improvements to the Plan

1, Concerns and Resistances To Plan

2. Preventions to Concerns and Resistances

The positive barrel - First participants are given the opportunity to state their ideal improvements to how a strategy might be implemented in their area. Then they are asked to draft feasible, cost-effective versions of the ideas.

The negative barrel – Participants are asked to list why the strategy won't work – their concerns, resistances, and so forth. Then they are asked to recommend their preventative ideas.

Not only does this process improve your plan; it gives your colleagues a chance to vent in a receptive environment. This more often than not turns pessimists into supporters of the strategy. The best improvements and most important preventatives should then be included in the action plan.

This paper is intended to serve as an *aide-memoire* for you on some of the substantive concepts inherent in learning how to lead a great brainstorming session with your group, as well as provide some variations and useful supplementary techniques. So book your favorite conference room, order up some Krispie Kremes, get your team together, and brainstorm up some possible ideas and solutions to that important issue that has been nagging at you.

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