Public Sector Innovation

Guidebook

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Brainstorming

What is it?

Brainstorming is an ultimate group creativity thinking tool, whereby participants seek to find consensus and a conclusion for a specific problem by gathering a list of ideas and possibilities spontaneously. It can be used at any time in the process of seeking a solution to a problem. Starting individually, writing our ideas on how we understand the problem down on post-its and sharing them with other participants, starting a round of explanations in which everybody introduces and explains their ideas, and putting them in front to be able to visually grasp them all at once.

After introducing all ideas, we start a discussion making clusters, grouping three or four ideas as the most important for solving the challenge we are working on. It encourages open collaboration, withholds criticism and defers judgment, and welcomes unusual ideas, and, importantly, helps foster stronger teams.

This exercise benefits from quantity over quality, as only with amassing enough ideas would you jointly be able to distill them and come to an agreement.

When to use it?

In situations where creative, cognitive thinking is required.

How to use it ? – 7 brainstorming techniques

1. Make sure the facilitator sets the right tone. Without a strong and enthusiastic leader, the session can easily go off course. Participants may be reluctant to relax and engage in a sense of playfulness. At the outset, the facilitator should stress the need for brevity in making comments, and simple things like one person speaking at a time, refraining from analyzing another person's idea, and the importance of building on other's ideas.

The facilitators' job is to build trust. They should also observe the body language and tacit, informal ways of communication between participants. If the spirit and mood of the team is down, the facilitator is invited to go into coaching mode, encouraging and even temporarily becoming part of the group to model the behavior that encourages risk-taking.

2. Use challenge questions to focus the session. While brainstorming is fun and mind-expanding, mostly we do it because we need fresh solutions to hard problems. An unclear mission will produce unclear ideas. One way to clarify it is with clearly defined challenge questions. A recommended one to use is "in what way?" and "how might we?". In what way might we improve employee engagement? In what way might we add value to this governmental service?

Such challenge questions spur the brain to search for alternative answers, and that's what creativity is all about.

3. Go for quantity, not quality. This technique discourages judgment and analysis, aiming to surface the maximum number of raw ideas. Shoot for 100 raw ideas in 30 minutes and set a time limit to keep the pressure on. The greater the number of ideas generated the higher the chance of producing a radical and unconventional solution. It usually takes 80 to 100 raw ideas to find one that is worth further consideration.

4. Discourage judgment and analysis. The natural human tendency is to want to analyze and discuss the merits of ideas, but the objective of a brainstorming exercise is to dream up lots of ideas and withhold judgment during the process. The more experienced and educated the group, usually the more of a friendly drill sergeant the facilitator needs to be to get people out of their heads and into the flow.

All criticism of ideas must be discouraged. It is the death knell to effective brainstorming. Instead, the key is encouraging participants to focus on turning their minds inside out for yet more ideas, for piggybacking on other's ideas, and for finding additional ideas after they feel "tapped out."

5. Encourage wild and even "absurd" ideas. To paraphrase Einstein, "If at first an idea doesn't sound absurd, then there's no hope for it." By encouraging participants to suspend judgment of ideas, participants will feel free to generate unusual ideas, bold ideas, humorous ideas and even absurd ideas. In the room, there should be frequent bursts of laughter and enthusiastic cheers now and then, as a proof that ideas presented sound absurd and crazy.

If the group is overly-linear in their thinking and overly analytical, the session should start with a fun exercise that has nothing to do with the main brainstorm objective.

6. Make sure everyone's ideas get captured and displayed. This is essential. To ensure that introverts as well as extraverts feel their ideas have been received, all ideas must be captured and eventually displayed on some common medium.

You can start a session by displaying the challenge question ("In what ways might we do X differently?") on writing board, and kick off the brainstorm by having participants jot down their ideas on individual sticky notes for a period of quiet time before coming together as a team to consolidate the ideas (eliminating duplicate ideas). The trick here is having a common medium to display ideas and everybody feels an equal contributor to the session, and no idea gets lost.

Case

studies.