How to Facilitate a Brainstorming Session

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Brainstorming is a relatively simple technique to gather ideas, information, concepts, or designs. It provides, in the initial instance, no evaluation of value, or repetition, or similarity to any other idea.

It is a group creativity technique in which participants are asked to provide solutions to a particular problem or find a conclusion to an issue by gathering a list of ideas spontaneously contributed by its members. The term was popularized by Alex Faickney Osborn in the 1953 book Applied Imagination.

Step 1 - Setup is critical

You will need a flip-chart, wall paper, whiteboard or electronic equivalent. This is crucial as Brainstorming needs to involve the whole selected team, which means that everyone must be able to see what's happening.

Brainstorming places a significant burden on the facilitator to manage the process, people's involvement and sensitivities, and then to manage the follow up actions. The participants must feel that the exercise will result in an outcome and that the workshop is not just a talkfest, or a social party to fill in time. Perceived value of the exercise removes cynical undertones and maximises the opportunity for worthwhile contributions.

Step 2 - Explain the Rules

Once the group is assembled, make sure that they understand the rules: no evaluation or commentary on anyone's idea is permitted, any idea is acceptable, there should be no grouping of ideas (even if an idea is presented in a slightly different way), no idea should be subsumed into any of the other ideas already offered. Set a time limit on each brainstorming activity.

If the group is being divided into smaller groups, explain how the ideas will be shared after the ideas collection phase.

If using post-it notes, there should be sufficient pads and space to place the notes.

Step 3 - Define and agree the objective

Make sure that everyone knows what the problem is that they are there to solve. The problem may be divided into parts. Different questions/problem elements may be divided into separate brainstorming collection sessions.

Step 4 - Brainstorm ideas and suggestions having agreed a time limit.

Step 5 - Categorise/Condense/Combine/Refine

Having collected the ideas, provide an opportunity for each sub-group to clarify and explain what was meant by the words expressed.   If there was only one group, there is no need to join the solutions together; however, clarification may be required to ensure a common understanding.

Group the ideas into similar categories.

Merge similar ideas, ensuring that nuance is not lost.

Where additional clarification delivers better understanding, capture that clarification or refinement.

Step 6 - Assess/Analyse Effects or Results

For the grouped solutions, review each solution for its practicality, impact, effect on the business, likelihood of delivery, and consequence.   Cost may be a factor that is considered. There may need to be an ethical or legal consideration as well.

Step 7 - Prioritise Options/Rank the List

With the list of ideas or elements of a solution, you need to weight the perceived importance of each captured idea.

One method for group prioritisation is to provide three (or any other number) votes per person for their use in supporting a select number of ideas.   If you are using a whiteboard or flipchart each participant can mark their selections next to the idea. The facilitator can then add the marks to gain a prioritization of the ideas.

Step 8 - Agree Actions, Responsibilities and Timescale

As a final element of the group meeting, the group needs to set actions, accountable parties and milestones for deliverables.

Step 9 - Control and monitor follow-up.

The facilitator ensures that a record of the brainstorming is made and circulated to all parties. The actions with their associated accountable person(s) is also part of that record.   The sponsor of the brainstorm session then follows up to ensure actions are completed.

See also:
- SWOT analysis - for assessing the strength of a business, department, proposition or idea.
- PEST analysis - for measuring the attractiveness and potential of a market.
- The McKinsey Seven-S's - criteria for a successful business.
- Adizes corporate life-cycle model - phases of business development.
- Delegation model - successful task delegation and staff development through delegation.
- Tuckman's group development model - forming, storming, norming, performing.

- Kolb's learning styles - for training the trainers, coaching the coaches, and management development.
- Leadership attributes - for developing leadership among managers.
- Negotiation process - for sales and commercial staff and optimising on profitable outcomes and customer relationships.
- Cherie Carter-Scott's rules of life - behaviour and attitude development and soft skills development.
- PODS Change Leadership for implementing business change projects.
- The Four Agreements - behaviour and attitude development and soft skills development.

Useful References

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