The Essence of Brainstorming

Brainstorming is a particular way of using the ideas of many individuals to solve a problem creatively. Its supporters claim that individuals can arrive at a better solution by acting collectively.

Advocates of brainstorming also claim that one of its merits is that it distinguishes between the two cognitive activities that are central to all problem-solving:
- Free conjecture (having ideas)
- Rigorous criticism (testing these ideas)

By separating these activities and focusing on the conjectural aspect of problem-solving — uninhibited by the threat of criticism — brainstorming is meant to release the embedded creativity of the group.

Organize An Effective Brainstorming Session

Successful brainstorming encourages a group of people, led by a facilitator, to voice all of their ideas on a specific topic in an atmosphere of constructive suggestion. The group then explores and prioritizes the ideas that have been put forward, and usually creates new solutions using elements from several suggestions.

Open, honest communication is the key to successful brainstorming. To achieve this, the facilitator should start by creating a comfortable environment and setting appropriate expectations.

The step-by-step brainstorming process

1. Gather a group of people to address the problem.
2. Establish the ground rules for the session.
   - Four basic rules
     - **Suspend judgment** Refrain from judging the ideas while they are being shared.
     - **Record all ideas** Transcribe every suggestion exactly as it is expressed, however half-baked or far-fetched it may seem at first.
     - **Encourage piggy backing** Let each idea spark further ideas and build on the creativity of others.
     - **Think out of the box** Encourage and pursue seemingly conflicting lines of thought.
3. Set up a system to capture the ideas (chalk board, white board, computer software).
4. Designate one member of the group to record each idea that is put forward.
5. State the problem requiring a solution in the form of a clear question.
6. Encourage every member of the group to "storm the problem" by contributing as wide a range of potential solutions as possible.
7. Withhold criticism or challenges to any of the ideas put forward, however impractical or irrelevant they may appear to be at first.
8. Review and amend suggestions only when the flow of ideas has dried up.

**Tips for successful facilitation**

- Clearly communicate the goal of the brainstorming session well in advance. This gives people time to prepare their thoughts and ideas.
- Invite all the people who could make a valuable contribution to the discussion.
- Ensure that the participants are relaxed, comfortable, and focused — only then will they make their best contributions and generate ideas.
- Discuss the ground rules, and then positively but firmly ensure that they are followed.
- Set the tone with a positive, energetic approach.
- After ideas have emerged, look for the patterns and links between them.
- Be prepared to prompt the discussion and draw people back to the key issues if the participants get too far off track.
- Agree to the action items resulting from the brainstorming session: what will be done, who will do it, and by when.
- Conclude the session so that everyone leaves with a clear understanding of what has been achieved.
- Consider whether other people need to be informed of the decisions and action items arising from the brainstorm.

**Five potential problems**

Research has suggested that five problems may explain why groups can sometimes fail to outperform individuals in generating ideas or solutions to a problem.

1. **Social loafing**   Approaching the problem as a group can provide an excuse for individual members to opt out and take it easy. This outweighs the opposite effect of "social energizing," which sees personal creativity boosted by the presence of others.
2. **Loss of face**   The fear of being judged or made to feel foolish can inhibit individuals during an idea-generating session, even though criticism isn't allowed during this phase.
3. **Production blocking**   Individuals may feel the need to wait for others to express their ideas, by which time they may have forgotten their own ideas or lost confidence in them. This counters the view that creativity is contagious and that ideas spark further ideas.
4. **Anchoring**   The creativity of the group can be reduced to producing variations of the first theme that emerges in the session. This can prevent individuals from coming up with new ways of approaching the problem.
5. **Hot-housing**   The time pressure that is thought to energize the creative process can instead produce a stressed state that inhibits people from thinking freely and imaginatively.