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Brainstorming Should Not Be a Team Sport

By Joan McCain
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Every product, business or organization, from Pop-Tarts to Purina to PTAs, needs innovation to thrive and survive. Innovation is dependent on ideas. And generating ideas is essential to the bottom line.

Then why do so many executives do it incorrectly?

Brainstorming, a conference technique for stimulating ideas and spontaneous discussion, is a science. That's proven fact. After years of experimentation and trial, creative thought leaders have learned what works best and what causes the flow of ideas to dry up.

These techniques were brought to my attention as I researched them during my 25-year creative career in advertising agencies prior to working in higher education, when even though I was surrounded by people who valued the creative process, and I worked for companies that rewarded it, the way brainstorming was conducted too often brought little valuable results. Fueled in equal parts by a desire to help our output and not waste time in useless meetings, I hit the books to figure out where the process broke down.

Based on that research, and my own experience, I offer three ways to build a better mousetrap to catch your next great idea.

1. Look in other fields

A widget maker looking to do it better has a natural inclination: look at other widget makers. Is that helpful? Maybe. Sometimes. The real pot of gold, though, more likely is in another building altogether. What if a widget maker studied how the Tesla is designed, produced, and marketed? There are so many opportunities to learn about new approaches and tactics by looking in a sector that has nothing to do with your own. The conventional wisdom, as described by creativity expert Roger von Oech, whose books I have read multiple times, is that when we want to learn history, we go to a museum and when we want to see fashion, we go to a boutique. But, he points out, creative people know history can be found in a hardware store and fashion can be found in an airport.

2. Ideas come in solitude

The way to get one really good idea is to get lots of ideas. And what generates the most ideas? When individuals brainstorm alone and in quiet. A creativity seminar exercise called “The Shifting Game” proves it. Tasked with designing a new kitchen trash can in 20 minutes, groups are separated and given different instructions. Group A brainstorms in the traditional manner, sharing ideas out loud, spontaneously. Group B is told to spend 15 minutes brainstorming by themselves, not speaking, writing ideas as fast as possible on a single sheet of paper. For the last five minutes, they share the best of their lists and record any new ideas that came from sharing or combining. The result? Group B generates more ideas—by a ratio of 7 to 1. This is winning the idea lottery.

3. Feedback takes a back seat

Brainstorming environments are delicate ecosystems. They need the right climate so ideas can take root. What kills that ecosystem? Judgment. Evaluation. Negative feedback.

With the goal being quantity of ideas, a free flow has to be nurtured. What stops forward momentum dead in its tracks are those all-too-frequent retorts of, “We don’t have the budget for that,” or “The boss would never go for that,” or “That’s impossible.” Just as deadly are eye rolls, heavy sighs and suppressed laughs that make contributors feel self-conscious and defensive, and cause them to shut down. What happens next? Crash and burn.

This phase is not about what will work, what is right, what will get approved, what is politically, environmentally or metaphysically correct. It is a time to let your mind wander, roam, allow clashes of ideas to occur, to be funny, to be silly, and to see what happens. That’s idea fertilizer.

The Take Away

The lesson to businesses and organizations: Brainstorming is not a team sport. Don’t call employees into a conference room, give them a pack of Post-it notes, and say, “Let’s brainstorm.” That will give you group speak and only the ideas they know you want to hear. Plus, with the first negative comment after an employee is brave enough to offer something that would really get the party started, the momentum shuts down.

Rather, give your team background and instruction. Then send them away to think and make lists alone. Have them send their ideas anonymously to a trusted manager, who compiles them in a broad fashion. Then, let the team come together to evaluate and refine.

That’s a better mousetrap. And it will catch big, fat results.

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