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Gathering Information: Brainstorming
Quick Tips for Team Leaders
by Jeff Oltmann

Quick Tips for Team Leaders[1]

Gathering Information: Brainstorming [2]

Jeff Oltmann

Brainstorming is a method for generating many creative ideas in a short period of time, making it a divergence activity.   Participants call out their ideas as they think of them, so that each person has an opportunity to build on the ideas of others.

The goal of brainstorming is to stimulate creative thinking.   Follow these guidelines:

1. Don't criticize or evaluate the ideas – just record all of them

2. Encourage wild ideas

3. Hitchhike – combine, modify, and build new ideas on the ideas of others

4. Encourage quantity

When

Use brainstorming when:
1.   A broad range of options is desired.
2.   Creative possibilities and ideas are needed.
3.   You need to capture input from a variety of people

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[1] This series of "Quick Tips" articles is by Jeff Oltmann, experienced program and technology executive and principal of Synergy Professional Services, LLC in Oregon, USA. The Quick Tips offer simple approaches and models for problem analysis, gathering ideas and input from team members, facilitation and taking action. The tips offered in this series were identified or developed over two decades of helping program, project and team leaders get things done in faster, more agile ways. Learn more about Jeff Oltmann in his author profile at the end of this article.

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How

Review the guidelines for brainstorming (above) with the entire group. The leader ensures that the group understands the objective of the brainstorming session and the process to be used, then presents the situation in the form of a question.   The question should use wording that encourages specific, tangible ideas, not opinions or vague concepts. Often it is best phrased as a "why," "how," or "what" question.

Then use one of the following brainstorming procedures.

Free Wheeling

1. Allow several minutes of silence for everyone to think about the question, then start the brainstorming.

2. Group members call out ideas spontaneously.

3. Facilitator or scribe records ideas as they are suggested.

Round Robin

1. Allow several minutes of silence for everyone to think about the question.

2. Facilitator asks each member in turn for an idea.

3. Facilitator or scribe records ideas as they are suggested.

4. Participants may pass on any round.

5. Session continues until everyone has passed during the last round.

Slip Method

1. Facilitator asks participants to write down their ideas individually. There is no group interaction.

2. The ideas are collected and organized.

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Technique	Pro	Con
Free Wheeling	- Spontaneous - Most creative results - Encourages ideas built on input from several people	- Loudest participants may dominate, discouraging quieter people - Can get confusing, resulting in lost ideas
Round Robin	- Involves participants more equally - Tends to focus discussion - Allows ideas built on input from several people	- Some loss of energy while participants waiting for turn - Less able to build on ideas from others - Reluctance to pass when out of good ideas
Slip Method	- Anonymity allows sensitive topics to surface - Can be used with very large groups - Gathers ideas from quiet participants	- Not interactive - can't build on ideas of others - Difficult to clarify or get context for ideas - Slower

Tips

1. Record ideas where everyone can see them during the session to encourage building on them.

2. Judgment and creativity cannot occur simultaneously. That's the reason for the rules about no criticism and no evaluation.

3. Record ideas on flip charts or large pieces of paper. When ideas overflow to additional flipchart pages, post previous pages around the room so all ideas are still visible to everyone. If you write directly on a whiteboard you will have to do a lot of copying after the session (or take a photo).

4. Encourage unconventional thinking. Crazy ideas often come from a different perspective and can lead to great solutions by sparking someone's imagination.

5. If brainstorming will be followed immediately by an affinity exercise, consider recording the brainstorming ideas directly onto cards or stickies.

6. You can "seed" ideas by taking a few minutes at the start for each participant to write down some initial ideas that he can throw into the session at the appropriate time.

7. The skill of the facilitator has a large influence. Practice or call in an expert.

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8. For large groups, have a facilitator AND one or more scribes so that the rapid flow of ideas is not impeded.

9. The scribe should try not to rephrase ideas. If an idea is not clear or is too long to capture, ask the person who suggested to rephrase it in a way that can be recorded and that everyone can understand.

10. Karl Albrect's *Brain Power* suggests phrases that the facilitator can use to spur ideas. "How can we: "

    a. put to new uses

    b. adapt

    c. find similar things

    d. magnify

    e. eliminate

    f. make smaller

    g. substitute

    h. rearrange

    i. combine

    j. blend

For further information, see the ASQ article on brainstorming at http://asq.org/learn-about-quality/idea-creation-tools/overview/brainstorm.html

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Jeff Oltmann is a seasoned leader with over 30 years of experience advising clients, managing successful technology programs, and developing new products. His specialties include strategy deployment, operational and project excellence, and project portfolio management. As principal consultant at Synergy Professional Services, Jeff advises leaders and teams in diverse sectors including healthcare, research, bioscience, and technology product development.

Jeff is the founder of the Portfolio and Project Leaders Forum. He is also on the graduate faculty of the Division of Management at Oregon Health and Science University and was previously on executive staff at IBM.   He teaches portfolio, program, and project management and is a certified Project Management Professional (PMP®).

Jeff welcomes your questions and ideas. You can contact him at jeff@spspro.com or read previous articles at www.spspro.com/article-library.