

4 brainstorming techniques that work

Brainstorming, the practice of voicing a bunch of ideas while withholding judgment, became popular in the early 1950s with the promise of producing more ideas as a group.

But it never worked as well as expected.

No study has shown that group brainstorming produces more alternatives than individuals working alone for a while and then coming together to share their ideas and build on them.

In fact, individuals perform better than groups in generating answers, on average.

Why? Because of cognitive pitfalls and social tendencies such as groupthink, fear of judgment and social loafing (shedding responsibility to others). Extroverts tend to dominate introverts, hampering their contribution. Not to mention that sharing one idea at a time can be incredibly inefficient.

What to do instead? Here are 4 modern brainstorming techniques that work.



1. Question Burst



2. BrainSwarming



3. Anonymous Brainstorming



4. Tips for Traditional Brainstorming

1. Question burst

The Question burst method is about *brainstorming for questions rather than answers*.

It was developed by the executive director of the MIT Leadership Center, Hal Gregersen.

You can use it in a group or individually to help you reframe a problem, when you are feeling stuck or trying to imagine new alternatives.

How to do a question burst:

1. Pick the challenge to address.
2. Invite some people to help you consider the challenge from fresh angles. Or think of it on your own. This is a trade-off between making yourself vulnerable and summoning empathy and help from others.
If you choose to do it in a group, communicate the challenge to others in a high-level way, as neutrally as possible. In your explanation, mention what would change for the better if the problem were solved and briefly say why you are stuck.
3. State the rules: People can contribute only questions. No answers. No justifications to their questions.
4. Do a quick, 10-second emotion check to reflect on your feelings about the challenge: are they positive, neutral, or negative? (just you)
5. Set a timer and spend the next 4 minutes (collectively) generating as many questions as possible about the challenge. Emphasis is on quantity. Try for at least 15. Write them down verbatim.
6. Do a quick, 10-second emotion check. How do you feel about the challenge now? More positive? If not, rerun the exercise if possible.
7. Ideally, do at least 3 rounds of question burst for a given issue. The more you do it the deeper you will go in your thinking.
8. Once you are satisfied with the questions you have, study them on your own, looking for those that suggest new pathways. Is there a question that reframes the problem and provides a new angle for solving it? (4 out of 5 times there will be).
9. Select a few of these questions and apply the “five whys” sequence to expand these questions. Ask yourself why the question you chose seems important. Then ask why the reason you gave is important. And so on.
10. End of process. You now have a better understanding of the challenge and new ways to address it.

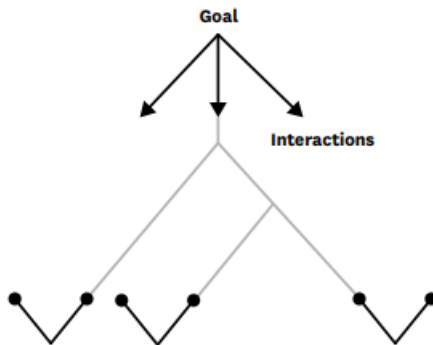
2. BrainSwarming

Ants solve problems by living signals in their environment that influence the behavior of their fellow ants. When searching for food, successful ants leave traces of pheromones along their path as a signal to the other ants that here's a path to dinner.

The BrainSwarming process was developed by Dr Tony McCaffrey, Chief Technology Officer at Innovation Accelerator.

BrainSwarming produces up to 115 ideas in 15 minutes versus 100 ideas per hour for traditional brainstorming. By switching from talking to writing on a structured graph BrainSwarming greatly improves the effectiveness of group work.

The graph can be something simple (see below) with the goal at the top, resources at the bottom and arrows to spark the interactions between participants.



How to do BrainSwarming:

1. Place the goal at the top of the brainstorming graph and the few known resources at the bottom.
2. Instruct the group not to talk but to simply add sticky notes and lines to the graph. People who are naturally top-down thinkers will start refining the goal. Bottom-up thinkers will analyze how the resources can be used or they will add new resources. After some time, the two directions will connect - an indication that the group is finding ways to use the resources to solve the problem.

3. Anonymous brainstorming

Anonymous brainstorming, along with silent voting, can serve as a counterweight to individuals' motivations to conform to groups pressure and help contributors feel like their expertise and ideas are being fairly considered.

The method was introduced by McKinsey consultants.

How to perform anonymous brainstorming:

1. Appoint a facilitator to collect ideas written on pieces of paper or submitted through a central software application. (This step would be managed ahead of the brainstorming session.)
2. During brainstorming, are not presented in a specific order nor tied to specific sources, which enables people to offer proposals that may run counter to management's position.
3. The facilitator then reads aloud the list of submissions in random order.
4. The participants vote on the ideas independently (and anonymously) to reveal the degree of alignment behind each idea.
5. Once the submissions are vetted and reprioritized, the group can repeat the silent-voting process until a clear choice can be made.

4. Enhanced brainstorming

Sometimes it's hard to change the way things are done by suggesting a different method. People might insist to brainstorm the way they feel familiar with.

If that's the case, try to implement the following tips to improve the outcome of the brainstorming session:

- Encourage participants to step out of their traditional roles when generating ideas.
- Consider hybrid alternatives. In many cases, it's possible to combine the features of two or more existing ideas into a new and superior one.
- Ask probing questions such as "What alternatives should we consider?", "How should we respond to concerns about X?" and "What assumptions are we making?".
- Invite outsiders, experts as well as novices, to participate in brainstorming. Outsiders provide fresh ideas, different perspectives and meaningful critiques.
- Revisit abandoned alternatives from time to time to ensure that they were discarded for sound reasons.

The wrap-up

Traditional brainstorming is riddled with group dynamics, mental models and cognitive issues. Use your time productively and get better results by employing one or more of these techniques. Good luck.



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