**BRAINSTORMING**

Creative thinking requires tools such as the brainstorm and the affinity diagram. Brainstorming is simply listing all ideas put forth by a group in response to a given problem or question. In 1939, a team led by advertising executive Alex Osborn coined the term "brainstorm." According to Osborn, "Brainstorm means using the ***brain*** to ***storm*** a creative problem and to do so" in commando fashion, each brainstormer audaciously attacking the same objective." Creativity is encouraged by not allowing ideas to be evaluated or discussed until everyone has run dry. Any and all ideas are considered legitimate, and often the most far-fetched are the most fertile. Structured brainstorming produces numerous creative ideas about any given "central question". Done right, it taps the human brain's capacity for lateral thinking and free association.

A brainstorm starts with a clear question and ends with a raw list of ideas. That's what it does well - give you a raw list of ideas. Some will be good, and some won't. But, if you try to analyse ideas in a brainstorming session, you will ruin the session. Wait. Later, you can analyse the results of a brainstorm with other quality improvement tools. In particular, affinity diagramming is designed to sort a raw list, using "gut feel" to begin to categorise the raw ideas. It is most often the next step beyond brainstorming.

Before beginning any effective brainstorming session, ground rules must be set. This doesn't mean that boundaries are set so tightly that you can't have fun or be creative. It does mean that a code of conduct for person to person interactions has been set. It's when this code of conduct is breached that people stop being creative.

The best way to have meaningful ground rules is to have the team create their own. Try performing a mini-brainstorming session around creating brainstorming ground rules. It should provide a nice opportunity to practise the skills necessary for an effective brainstorming session. This also allows the team to take ownership of acceptable and unacceptable behaviours. Only if the team hasn't addressed the key ground rules should you (as the facilitator) add to the list. Once the ground rules list is generated be sure to gain consensus that the session will be conducted according to them, and post them in a highly visible location in the room.

**BRAINSTORMS HELP ANSWER SPECIFIC QUESTIONS SUCH AS:**

* What opportunities face us this year?
* What factors are constraining performance in Department X?
* What could be causing problem Y?
* What can we do to solve problem Z?

However, a brainstorm cannot help you positively identify the causes of problems, rank ideas in a meaningful order, select important ideas, or check solutions. To conduct a successful brainstorm:

1. Make sure everyone understands and is satisfied with the central question before you open up for ideas.
2. You may want to give everyone a few seconds to jot down a few ideas before getting started.
3. Begin by going around the table or room, giving everyone a chance to voice their ideas or pass. After a few rounds, open the floor.
4. More ideas are better. Encourage radical ideas and piggybacking.
5. Suspend judgement  of all ideas.
6. Record exactly what is said. Clarify only after everyone is out of ideas.
7. Don't stop until ideas become sparse. Allow for late-coming ideas.
8. Eliminate duplicates and ideas that aren't relevant to the topic.

**KEY GROUNDRULES THAT ARE USEFUL WHEN CONDUCTING A BRAINSTORMING SESSION:**

**Sharpen the focus**

Start with a well-honed statement of the problem at hand. Edgy is better than fuzzy. The best topic statements focus *outward* on a specific problem rather than *inward* on some organisational goal. There are no dumb ideas. Period. It's a brainstorming session, not a serious matter that requires only serious solutions. Remember, this is one of the more fun tools of quality, so keep the entire team involved!

**Write playful rules**

"Defer judgment" and "One conversation at a time" are primary rules. Other rules include, "Go for quantity," "Be visual," and "Encourage wild ideas."

**Number your ideas**

Numbered lists create goals to motivate participants. You can say, 'Let's try to get to 100 ideas.' Also, lists provide a reference point if you want to jump back and forth between ideas.

**Build and jump**

Most brainstorming sessions follow a power curve: They start out slowly, build to a crescendo, and then start to plateau. The best facilitators nurture the conversation in its early stages, step out of the way as the ideas start to flow, and then jump in again when energy starts to peter out.

**Make the space remember**

Good facilitators should also write ideas down on an accessible surface such as a board or a wall.

**Stretch your mental muscles**

Brainstorming, like marathon running, should begin with warm-up exercises. So start it easy and go deeper into the subject as participants are getting involved!

**Get physical**

Bring examples of competitors' products, objects that relate to the problem, or elegant solutions from other fields as springboards for ideas. Also keeps materials on hand to build crude models of a concept.

**Don't criticise other people's ideas**

This isn't a debate, discussion or forum for one person to display superiority over another.

**Build on other people's ideas**

Often an idea suggested by one person can trigger a bigger and/or better idea by another person. Or a variation of an idea could be the next “Big Thing”. It is this building of ideas that leads to out of the box thinking and fantastic ideas.

**Reverse the thought of quality over quantity**

Here we want quantity; the more creative ideas the better. You can even make it a challenge to come up with as many ideas as possible and compare performance to the last brainstorming session you conducted.

**OTHER BRAINSTORMING PREPARATION QUESTIONS:**

* Who will lead or facilitate the brainstorming session?
* Who will participate in the brainstorming session?
* Who can write *very* quickly to record the brainstormed ideas without slowing down the group?
* Where will the brainstorming session be held?
* What materials are needed for brainstorming (easel, paper, white board, pens, etc.)?
* What is my brainstorming session desired outcome?