Lead Every Day

Ten Tips for Brilliant Brainstorming

01 Appoint a Facilitator

These tips are not listed in order of priority. They are all proven ways to increase the quality and quantity of your creative output. The more of these ideas you can incorporate the better! However, this initial tip may be the first among equals. A prepared and competent facilitator is worth their weight in gold in brainstorming sessions. He or she will be the single greatest factor in the success of your efforts – at least in the beginning. Over time, you will want everyone in the group to join the official facilitator and work together to ensure the best possible outcomes. Until your group has developed the level of skill and maturity to make this a reality, the responsibility for applying the tips we're about to explore rests clearly on the shoulders of the facilitator.

Have you ever considered what a great facilitator does? They remove barriers. This shows up in two primary areas. The facilitator anticipates barriers before the meeting and eliminates them before the group convenes. As an example, if you didn't have a place to meet, that would be a barrier. If you didn't have a flip chart and markers, that would be a barrier. If you didn't have the right participants in the room to maximize your upcoming session, that would be a barrier. All of these can be addressed in advance... barrier removed or avoided all together.

The other arena where it is critical to remove barriers is during the meeting. If someone is dominating the conversation, the facilitator needs to remove the barrier in real time. They might say, "Sharon, thanks for your thoughts on this. Let's see what others think." Or an equally problematic situation would be someone not participating, "Kevin, you've been quiet on this – what are you thinking?" Obviously, not everyone has to speak on every issue but full participation yields better outcomes. The facilitator must learn to address these situations skillfully in the moment.

02 Include Diverse Voices

The magic behind brainstorming can be traced back to the methodology. Regardless of how smart any single individual is, the group's collective wisdom makes the team even smarter. Just imagine linking all the brains in the room together to form one supercomputer. Almost instantly, you have at least 10X the computing power, but in reality you have much more. You are not only harnessing the collective intelligence of the group, you are tapping into their experiences, training, passions, and their creativity. The truth is, you may be 100X better at solving your most complex issues and perplexing problems.

The way to leverage this phenomenon is to be sure the participants are as diverse as possible. If everyone is similar in age, or all women, or all college grads, or all engineers, or all anything, you are sub-optimizing the power and potential of the group.
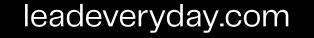
Here are a few categories to think about as you assemble your group.

Age	Tenure	Personal passion
Race	Functional role	Hobbies
Gender	Personality type	Proximity to the issue
Ethnicity	Country of origin	Level in the organization
Education	Hometown	Subject matter expertise
Experience	Familiarity with the problem	

Diversity does not guarantee better outcomes, but the lack of diversity will surely hinder the process
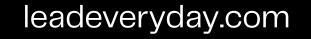
03 Pinpoint the Issue or Problem

This may feel like a blinding flash of the obvious, but it can be harder than you think. I have been in far too many brainstorming sessions in which the problem statement was broad, squishy, ill-defined, or some combination of the above. There are several negative outcomes if you fail to pinpoint the problem.

Lack of focus wastes time and energy while compromising your output. Poorly defined problem statements generate fewer ideas, fewer breakthroughs, and higher levels of frustration. Many times, when a brainstorming session fails to generate the needed insight, the culprit was in the room from the beginning – the problem was not pinpointed sufficiently or accurately. No one wins, everyone loses.

An ill-defined problem statement can be interpreted differently by different people. E.g. How do we increase engagement? This question is open to a lot of interpretation. Depending on how you are measuring engagement, you may learn that people don't feel their ideas are being heard by leadership. Brainstorm a solution to that and you are more likely to improve engagement.

Without a disciplined approach to creating a target for your brainstorming, the chances are high **you aren't focused on the right problem.** The presenting problem is rarely the real problem.

04 Capture All Ideas

In a brainstorming session, all ideas are valuable. Yes, I know that sounds strange. Clearly, we've all been in sessions when an idea is shared that is so absurd, off-point, or bizarre, we try not to laugh. That is a valuable idea! Maybe not on its on merit or face value. However, you don't know what other ideas it may spawn.

05 Visually Display the Proceedings

This is one of the most critical elements for great brainstorming sessions. If I could, I would buy every organization in the world a flip chart – or two! Whiteboards don't work and neither do smartboards, here's why. Part of the power and the magic behind successful brainstorming is your mind's ability to connect previously unconnected ideas; maybe you combine two or more thoughts or the stimulation received from these disparate ideas and form a new, even better idea. Why can't we do that on a whiteboard? You probably can for the first 100 ideas; what about the next 100 and the next? Sooner or later, you have to erase the board. With a flip chart, you simply post the pages on the wall for all to see. Then, it becomes possible for you to process and connect, consciously or subconsciously, idea #17 and #278.

One more reason to visually display your ideas is that it allows the person who shared the idea to confirm that the facilitator has adequately captured the essence of the idea. If someone is taking notes on an iPad, computer, or legal pad, the participants can't see what has been written down. This can lead an individual contributor to hold on to their idea for fear of losing it or they may begin to make their own list. In either case, their energy has now been diverted from the larger task at hand – generating more ideas!
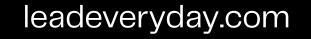
06 Suspend Judgment

This is one of the most challenging keys to make your brainstorming sessions successful; it is also one of the most misunderstood.

If you tell a group of people that you are going to suspend judgment, virtually everyone thinks the same thing, "Okay, we'll not tell someone their idea stinks." This would be a correct but incomplete thought. Certainly, you don't want anyone in the group criticizing the ideas of others. In the early stages of the process, the facilitator may have to intervene often. You may find it common for people to directly or indirectly challenge or question the merit of ideas shared by others. You want to create an "idea neutral" environment: no criticism or praise. The praise part of this proposition is often challenging.

If you work in an environment in which praise is given freely, to ask people to break with the cultural norm can be difficult. Here's why it is essential to extract the maximum number of ideas from your group. If someone shares an idea and someone else offers praise for the idea, others could establish that idea as a standard or threshold. They may consciously or subconsciously evaluate their own ideas against others that have received public praise or recognition. Invariably, they will withhold ideas they don't deem up to the level of the one, or ones, others have praised. Therefore, allowing praise, even if well intended, will likely suppress the number of ideas the group will produce.

07 Go for Quantity not Quality

This may feel strange to many of you. Why wouldn't we want QUALITY ideas? Certainly, you do want amazing ideas to surface. However, brainstorming is a lot like mining for gold or precious gems. The process demands you move a lot of dirt (a.k.a. bad ideas) in order to find your prize.

How many ideas do you need? I don't know, but you probably need several hundred more than you think you need. Then the process of sorting, ranking, judging, and ultimately deciding can begin.

Early in my career, a mentor told me that only one of two ideas out of every 100 would have any value and maybe, just maybe, one in a hundred would provide the insight or breakthrough you are looking for. Now, I didn't ask my mentor to produce the data to support his counsel. However, having participated in hundreds and hundreds, if not thousands of brainstorming sessions over my life to date, I would say his estimates were probably optimistic. Don't misinterpret this as a knock on brainstorming; I just want you to be realistic as you set your expectations. If you want to find the diamonds, you have to move the dirt.

08 Invest Sufficient Time

Of all the tips I've included in this list this is perhaps the most often violated and likely has the most disastrous impact. Brainstorming done well requires time. Imagine trying to bake chocolate chip cookies. Even though the recipe clearly calls for 12 minutes in the oven, if you decide to pull the cookies out of the oven at 3 minutes, you will not have cookies, you'll have a mess and you'll be disappointed. I can hear some of the logic the cook might use. "I didn't have 12 minutes." Or, "I was in a hurry." Or, "I was hungry." Or, "I needed the cookies fast so I turned up the oven to 800 degrees rather than the prescribed 400 degrees." Or, maybe they would say something is wrong with the oven or the recipe or the ingredients. They might blame everything except the fact they didn't invest the required time.

Brainstorming is similar to baking cookies. Although the recipe cannot be articulated with the precision, the research suggests that brainstorming typically occurs on two levels. In level one, you document what is already known. Typically, there are few insights or breakthroughs in level one. Level two is the domain of the new, innovative and previously unknown. Typically, the time required before you enter level two is 45 minutes.

Have many times have you been in a brainstorming session and all of a sudden the room fell quiet? What likely happened next was tragic. Far too many facilitators will say, "I guess we're finished." The odds are good, the silence signaled you were just finishing level one. The good stuff was right in front of you... if you had chosen to continue. If you want the gold, you have to move the dirt.
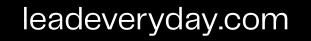
09 Pause for Review

In the midst of a brainstorming session, you need to allow ample time to reflect and process all that has been shared up until that moment. I am not aware of any formula for how long or how often you should pause. I would suggest at least every twenty to thirty minutes take a "review break." This is not the same as a break to freshen up or find a snack. This is an intentional break to allow everyone to read all the ideas that have been captured. You may even give the group a few minutes (three to five) post review to make notes about new ideas that may have surfaced during the pause. Then, get back on the task at hand. Remember, when done well, brainstorming should generate scores of ideas, maybe hundreds. Fight the temptation to just do a pause near the end of your session. Encourage everyone to sit with what they are seeing and hearing. Reflect, process, and then, proceed.

10 Alter the Format

There are three primary forms of brainstorming:

- Freewheeling
- Round Robin
- Slip Method

I recommend using all three every time you decide to brainstorm a problem or opportunity. Each has their own unique value.

Freewheeling is the most common form of brainstorming. Unless you have a skilled facilitator, it may be the only type you are familiar with. The format is simple. You pinpoint or frame the topic and let the people begin sharing their ideas. This is a great way to start your session. The ideas will probably flow freely; however, you may notice that not everyone is participating. After the ideas are flowing, it is time to switch to another format.

Round Robin is a format in which you go around the circle asking individuals if they have anything to contribute. There are three options at this point. 1) They can share an idea; 2) The person can say, "pass" and you move to the next person; 3) They may say nothing and you just wait with the group. The reason some people don't contribute during the freewheeling phase is that they need a moment of quiet to form their thoughts. You continue to go around the circle until everyone says pass. At this point, you are ready for your next form of brainstorming.

The **Slip Method** is defined by asking each member of the group to write down any ideas they would like to contribute – one idea per piece (slip) of paper. The ideas are also shared anonymously. The facilitator reads each slip aloud and adds them to the flip chart so everyone can see the idea. People contribute at this stage of the process for a couple of reasons. Perhaps they perceived their ideas as too radical to "own it." Maybe they are not yet convinced your group is a safe place to share out-of-the-box ideas. Some people will contribute using this method because there are most idea-prone when expressing their thoughts in writing. Either way, everyone wins.

After you've recorded everyone's ideas on the flip chart, I recommend another strategic pause so the group can reflect on the new input you've just received. At this point, I like to go back to Freewheeling and work through the cycle again.

Bonus Idea: Practice, Practice, Practice

Brainstorming is a skill. Like most skills, you can improve with practice. Don't worry if your early attempts feel awkward or mechanical. Do you remember what it felt like when you learned to ride a bike? You probably weren't totally comfortable or competent on your fist ride. Like riding a bike, once the best practices we've reviewed above are well practiced, they will become ingrained. You never forget how to ride a bike and once you've experienced the power of brainstorming to help you tackle your most challenging problems, you'll never forget the thrill and the sense of accomplishment. Stay with it!