Proven Tools to Improve your Brainstorming Sessions

Does your current project need a fresh, creative approach? Brainstorming can be an effective project management tool to help your team jumpstart project solutions. Read on for specific brainstorming tools.

Brainstorming can be a powerful way to discover incredible new ideas and take your projects in incredible new directions. A brainstorming session can also, however, be an exercise in futility if not handled properly.

Set Clear Objectives for Your Brainstorm

One of the most common errors in conducting brainstorming sessions is to charge headlong into it without first clarifying the purpose of the brainstorm.

The best brainstorming objectives are simple, meaning that they’re fixed around a single, central idea or issue that can be concisely stated in a single sentence. After you hone in on the fundamental challenge, you can then start to isolate and identify those other factors and elements that are contributing to it.

Brainstorming can perform miracles in nearly any situation and with nearly any issue, as long as the situation or issue is clear and specific. If you have multiple problems that need solving, multiple goals to achieve, then consider holding separate brainstorming sessions for each of them.

Setting the Scene

The right environment is an important factor in the success of a brainstorming session, so choose a location and arrangement that allows all participants to engage in the process equally. Be inclusive in your choice of team members to be involved in brainstorming—sometimes those people less familiar with project details can actually offer the freshest perspective.

Provide a large dry erase board, chalk board, sticky notes or flip chart on which to record brainstorming ideas. Be sure to have plenty of writing instruments and paper on hand for both visual and verbal thinkers. Designate a brainstorming recorder to write ideas legibly for all to see.

Three Tools/Methods for Effective Brainstorming

Following are three techniques and tools for effectively managing your next brainstorming session. Each has its advantages and disadvantages. Choose the one that makes the most sense for your brainstorming objectives.

1. Freewheeling Brainstorming
2. Structured Brainstorming
3. Mind Mapping

**Freewheeling Brainstorming Session**
A freewheeling brainstorming session encourages free thinking and energy around the objective. Once the objective is clarified for the group, they can begin throwing out ideas right away.

Typically this type of session uses one or more flip charts with recorders at each flipchart to capture the many ideas that are generated.

**ADVANTAGES**: Freewheeling creates energy and provides a large quantity of ideas that range from conservative to the ridiculous and everything in between. Often this can be the format of an initial brainstorm where quantity of ideas is important.

**DISADVANTAGES**: Not all team members will feel comfortable speaking up in this type of session. More assertive team members and quick thinkers can dominate the session with their ideas. So ideas can be missed.

**Structured Brainstorming Session**
A structured brainstorming session provides a structured process to ensure all team members have the opportunity to participate. Following are some steps and tools to use when leading a structured brainstorming session.

1. Define the brainstorming objective.
2. At the beginning of the session, allow 5-10 minutes for each person to create an individual brainstorming list.
3. Using the round robin technique (one person at a time, then move to the next), ask each person to share one idea and then capture those ideas.
4. Observe the rules of brainstorming – no discussion, no criticism, build on each other’s ideas. A participant may pass at any point in the process.
5. Continue around the room until all ideas have been captured.

**ADVANTAGES**: Using a structured approach to brainstorming allows all team members a chance to participate fully. Allows people who need to process information a chance to think quietly and gather their ideas before sharing, and it encourages building on others’ ideas.

**DISADVANTAGES**: A structured approach can be slow – especially if used with a large group. Unless brainstorming rules are followed – especially no discussion or questions during the session – the sessions could take a longer amount of time or fail to give everyone an opportunity to share all of their ideas in the time allotted.

**Using Mind Maps for Brainstorming Sessions**
Most people have been taught to think linearly – we make lists and we order the items on the list in logical ways. However, mind mapping allows you to capture ideas into topic areas without forcing you to worry about a priority, a particular order, or other types of sequencing. Mind mapping frees you to capture everything that comes to mind.

Mind maps are two-dimensional structural images that can be an effective way to brainstorm ideas in various settings. The method for Mind Mapping is extremely simple. All you need to get started is a piece of paper turned horizontally, colorful pens, your brain, and creativity.
Start in the center of your paper, turned horizontally. The blank paper turns your brain toward its creative side, without restrictions imposed by lines. See the following example of a mind map created around the word *hamburger*.

**ADVANTAGES:** Using a mind map with a group of people can help facilitate and focus a freewheeling brainstorm. Mind mapping allows you to dig deeper into specific topics without sequencing or prioritizing into a list.

One suggestion is to have each person begin their own mind map on a piece of paper. After a few minutes, have them pass their paper to someone else to continue building on the mind map. Repeat at least once more after a few minutes, and then have the last person to add to the map return it to the owner. This process jump starts brainstorming sessions and gets people focused on the objective.

**DISADVANTAGES:** While it can be used with a group, mind mapping is primarily an individual tool. And some people find it disorienting not to have a specific order to the ideas generated.