

Brainstorming and Reverse Brainstorming

We Know What to Do, Why Don't We Do it?

By Vicki Wrona, PMP

Introduction

We all know what brainstorming is and how to do it. Then how come so many people do it so poorly? They think they do it well, but as an observer, I can tell you they don't. And the ones who are proudest and loudest of their skills are often the ones lacking them the most. Let's explore what brainstorming is and why so many people find it difficult to do it right and get true benefits from it.

The Importance of Neutrality

The biggest obstacle I see is that those leading the brainstorming session are too involved in the outcome rather than the process. This is unfortunate and driven by the fact that we often run our own meetings and do not have the luxury of using an outside facilitator. As a manager or a project manager, if we need some new ideas, approaches or solutions, we lead the team in developing them. The trouble with this scenario is that we own the ultimate decision. That is normally not a bad thing and is part of our responsibility. But in the case of finding new solutions or ideas, if we are going to be held personally responsible for the outcome, we will be much more involved in finding and shaping that outcome. That means that we will quickly break the first rule of brainstorming which is to gather ideas without judging them. We will also limit thinking beyond the norm or outside the box by our team. That will limit the ideas that are stated and developed by inhibiting those who are participating in the process.

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Instead, if we had a facilitator, they would own the **PROCESS** and not the **RESULT**, and so could neutrally gather those ideas and act as the gatekeeper to stop others from judging, keeping the process open and encouraging.

Facilitation Options

What do we do if we need to brainstorm and know we cannot bring in an experienced outside facilitator? There are a couple options. One is to assign another team member to act as a facilitator for this issue. Select someone who is not intimately involved in the issue at hand so they are less likely to violate the rules of successfully brainstorming. You may need to coach this person prior to the meeting so they are clear on their role as facilitator and your expectations of the process. Set ground rules with the team before the brainstorming begins so everyone understands that this person will be leading the session and that you are an equal participator with everyone else. The last thing you want is your ideas or comments to squash participation from the team because of your rank or title as manager. They have expertise in areas you don't and you need that. I prefer this method when possible.

Another option is to acknowledge the potential shortcomings of personally leading a brainstorming session and make an effort to avoid them. However, I have found that even when I have just explained the challenges and pitfalls of brainstorming properly and gotten agreement from the PM that I am coaching that they will try not to fall into this trap, they will do so within the first couple minutes of the brainstorming session. It is human nature to try to manipulate the outcome and to get involved rather than to let it happen. It is very difficult to 'only' own the process and not get involved in the decision.

Reverse Brainstorming

Reverse brainstorming is a simple technique which can generate truly new ideas as well as ideas that have a better chance to last and have a greater positive impact.

With brainstorming, you present a problem at a meeting and expect everyone to come up with ideas on the spot on how to solve it. Rarely is creativity available on demand. You will get ideas, but they may not be optimal and tend to be similar to ideas from discussions already held.

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With reverse brainstorming, you ask your team to bring any ideas that struck them over the time period since your last meeting. For purposes of this discussion, let's assume that you hold weekly meetings with your team. You should provide notice to your team that you will be asking for this so they can (hopefully) keep a running list of ideas as they appear throughout the week. It is a different way of thinking than they are familiar with and may take some getting used to. Keeping a running list of ideas allows those ideas not to be forgotten or lost. This list is not designed to produce MANY ideas but rather QUALITY ideas. Using a list, separate ideas are kept in the forefront of your mind and may possibly be combined with other, seemingly disparate ideas to create one new, better idea.

At the next team meeting, anyone with an idea explains their idea as best they can, including how they developed and formed the idea. In other words, they would describe the ideas or concepts they combined to reach this idea. Then instead of judging the merits of this idea on the spot, everyone can then think about it over the next week. Giving your team time to digest and mull over the idea, to go back to the person to ask questions, and to talk it over with others, allows those ideas to percolate and grow. At the next meeting, those ideas with merit will hopefully come out and can be further explored. The first idea may morph into different and new ideas, and that is fine.

What this process does is generate more thoughtful ideas, create a team culture or expectation of always looking out for better ideas or approaches, and knowing that the idea will be given a fair chance to be evaluated (vs. traditional brainstorming where ideas are quickly judged). This will result not only in better and longer-lasting ideas but also in generating ideas in areas which may not have been looked into otherwise. Lastly, it also creates a culture of continuous improvement, a good environment for a project or an organization.

Conclusion

Regarding traditional brainstorming, I am probably not telling you anything new. We already know the rules of brainstorming and the role of a facilitator. But a reminder never hurts so we can improve our performance. Reverse brainstorming is discussed in the book *Strategic Intuition: The Creative Spark In Human Achievement* by William Duggan, a book I highly recommend for anyone wanting to understand how great ideas and new thinking come together and can be developed. It has intriguing examples from history as well as explanations on how to apply the concepts.

About Forward Momentum, LLC

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About the Author

Vicki Wrona, PMP, is the founder and President of Forward Momentum, LLC. She has over 20 years of leadership and project management experience, more than 15 years public speaking, and more than 15 years training and development experience. She has trained thousands of people, has mentored individuals and organizations and has authored multiple white papers and blogs. She was selected to serve on PMI's committee to write and review the PMBOK® Guide 4th edition and co-developed the program that won PMI's Professional Development Product of the Year award in 2007. She has served on the Board of Directors for the Texas Soaring Association. Her passion is equipping individuals and organizations with practical knowledge and tools so that results – and bottom-line impact – are consistently achieved.