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Seven steps to better brainstorming

Most attempts at brainstorming are doomed. To generate better ideas—and boost the odds that your organization will act on them—start by asking better questions.

MARCH 2011 • Kevin P. Coyne and Shawn T. Coyne



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Companies run on good ideas. From R&D groups seeking pipelines of innovative new products to ops teams probing for time-saving process improvements to CEOs searching for that next growth opportunity—all senior managers want to generate better and more creative ideas consistently in the teams they form, participate in, and manage.

Yet all senior managers, at some point, experience the pain of pursuing new ideas by way of traditional brainstorming sessions—still the most common method of using groups to

generate ideas at companies around the world. The scene is familiar: a group of people, often chosen largely for political reasons, begins by listening passively as a moderator (often an outsider who knows little about your business) urges you to “Get creative!” and “Think outside the box!” and cheerfully reminds you that “There are no bad ideas!”

The result? Some attendees remain stone-faced throughout the day, others contribute sporadically, and a few loudly dominate the session with their pet ideas. Ideas pop up randomly—some intriguing, many preposterous—but because the session has no structure, little momentum builds around any of them. At session’s end, the group trundles off with a hazy idea of what, if anything, will happen next. “Now we can get back to *real* work,” some whisper.

It doesn’t have to be like this. We’ve led or observed 200 projects over the past decade at more than 150 companies in industries ranging from retailing and education to banking and communications. That experience has helped us develop a practical approach that captures the energy typically wasted in a traditional brainstorming session and steers it in a more productive direction. The trick is to leverage the way people actually think and work in creative problem-solving situations.

We call our approach “brainsteering,” and while it requires more preparation than traditional brainstorming, the results are worthwhile: better ideas in business situations as diverse as inventing new products and services, attracting new customers, designing more efficient business processes, or reducing costs, among others. The next time you assign one of your people to lead an idea generation effort—or decide to lead one yourself—you can significantly improve the odds of success by following the seven steps below.

1. Know your organization’s decision-making criteria

One reason good ideas hatched in corporate brainstorming sessions often go nowhere is that they are beyond the scope of what the organization would ever be willing to consider. “Think outside the box!” is an unhelpful exhortation if external circumstances or company policies create boxes that the organization truly *must* live within.

Managers hoping to spark creative thinking in their teams should therefore start by understanding (and in some cases shaping) the real criteria the company will use to make decisions about the resulting ideas. Are there any absolute restrictions or limitations, for example? A bank we know wasted a full day’s worth of brainstorming because the session’s best ideas all required changing IT systems. Yet senior management—unbeknownst to the workshop planners—had recently “locked down” the IT agenda for the next 18 months.

Likewise, what constitutes an acceptable idea? At a different, smarter bank, workshop planners collaborated with senior managers on a highly specific (and therefore highly valuable) definition

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tailored to meet immediate needs. Good ideas would require no more than \$5,000 per branch in investment and would generate incremental profits quickly. Further, while three categories of ideas—new products, new sales approaches, and pricing changes—were welcome, senior management would balk at ideas that required new regulatory approvals. The result was a far more productive session delivering exactly what the company wanted: a fistful of ideas, in all three target categories, that were practical, affordable, and profitable within one fiscal year.

2. Ask the right questions

Decades of academic research shows that traditional, loosely structured brainstorming techniques (“Go for quantity—the greater the number of ideas, the greater the likelihood of winners!”) are inferior to approaches that provide more structure.¹ The best way we’ve found to provide it is to use questions as the platform for idea generation.

In practice, this means building your workshop around a series of “right questions” that your team will explore in small groups during a series of idea generation sessions (more about these later). The trick is to identify questions with two characteristics. First, they should force your participants to take a new and unfamiliar perspective. Why? Because whenever you look for new ways to attack an old problem—whether it’s lowering your company’s operating costs or buying your spouse a birthday gift—you naturally gravitate toward thinking patterns and ideas that worked in the past. Research shows that, over time, you’ll come up with fewer good ideas, despite increased effort. Changing your participants’ perspective will shake up their thinking. (For more on how to do this, see our upcoming article “Sparking creativity in teams: An executive’s guide,” to be published in April on mckinseyquarterly.com.) The second characteristic of a right question is that it limits the conceptual space your team will explore, without being so restrictive that it forces particular answers or outcomes.

It’s easier to show such questions in practice than to describe them in theory. A consumer electronics company looking to develop new products might start with questions such as “What’s the biggest avoidable hassle our customers endure?” and “Who uses our product in ways we never expected?” By contrast, a health insurance provider looking to cut costs might ask, “What complexity do we plan for daily that, if eliminated, would change the way we operate?” and “In which areas is the efficiency of a given department ‘trapped’ by outdated restrictions placed on it by company policies?”²

In our experience, it’s best to come up with 15 to 20 such questions for a typical workshop attended by about 20 people. Choose the questions carefully, as they will form the heart of your workshop—your participants will be discussing them intensively in small subgroups during a series of sessions.

3. Choose the right people

The rule here is simple: pick people who can answer the questions you’re asking. As obvious as this sounds, it’s *not* what happens in many traditional brainstorming sessions, where participants are often chosen with less regard for their specific knowledge than for their prominence on the org chart.

Instead, choose participants with firsthand, “in the trenches” knowledge, as a catalog retailer client of ours did for a brainstorming workshop on improving bad-debt collections. (The company had extended credit directly to some customers). During the workshop, when participants were discussing the question “What’s changed in our operating environment since we last redesigned our processes?” a frontline collections manager remarked, “Well, death has become the new bankruptcy.”

A few people laughed knowingly, but the senior managers in the room were perplexed. On further discussion, the story became clear. In years past, some customers who fell behind on their payments would falsely claim bankruptcy when speaking with a collections rep, figuring that the company wouldn’t pursue the matter because of the legal headaches involved. More recently, a better gambit had emerged: unscrupulous borrowers instructed household members to tell the agent they had died—a tactic that halted collections efforts quickly, since reps were uncomfortable pressing the issue.

While this certainly wasn’t the largest problem the collectors faced, the line manager’s presence in the workshop had uncovered an opportunity. A different line manager in the workshop proposed what became the solution: instructing the reps to sensitively, but firmly, question the recipient of the call for more specific information if the rep suspected a ruse. Dishonest borrowers would invariably hang up if asked to identify themselves or to provide other basic information, and the collections efforts could continue.

4. Divide and conquer

To ensure fruitful discussions like the one the catalog retailer generated, *don’t* have your participants hold one continuous, rambling discussion among the entire group for several hours. Instead, have them conduct multiple, discrete, highly focused idea generation sessions among

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subgroups of three to five people—no fewer, no more. Each subgroup should focus on a single question for a full 30 minutes. Why three to five people? The social norm in groups of this size is to speak up, whereas the norm in a larger group is to stay quiet.

When you assign people to subgroups, it's important to isolate "idea crushers" in their own subgroup. These people are otherwise suitable for the workshop but, intentionally or not, prevent others from suggesting good ideas. They come in three varieties: bosses, "big mouths," and subject matter experts.

The boss's presence, which often makes people hesitant to express unproven ideas, is particularly damaging if participants span multiple organizational levels. ("Speak up in front of my boss's boss? No, thanks!") Big mouths take up air time, intimidate the less confident, and give everyone else an excuse to be lazy. Subject matter experts can squelch new ideas because everyone defers to their presumed superior wisdom, even if they are biased or have incomplete knowledge of the issue at hand.

By quarantining the idea crushers—and violating the old brainstorming adage that a melting pot of personalities is ideal—you'll free the other subgroups to think more creatively. Your idea crushers will still be productive; after all, they won't stop *each other* from speaking up.

Finally, take the 15 to 20 questions you prepared earlier and divide them among the subgroups—about 5 questions each, since it's unproductive and too time consuming to have all subgroups answer every question. Whenever possible, assign a specific question to the subgroup you consider best equipped to handle it.

5. On your mark, get set, go!

After your participants arrive, but before the division into subgroups, orient them so that your expectations about what they will—and won't—accomplish are clear. Remember, your team is accustomed to traditional brainstorming, where the flow of ideas is fast, furious, and ultimately shallow.

Today, however, each subgroup will thoughtfully consider and discuss a single question for a half hour. No other idea from any source—no matter how good—should be mentioned during a subgroup's individual session. Tell participants that if anyone thinks of a "silver bullet" solution that's outside the scope of discussion, they should write it down and share it later.

Prepare your participants for the likelihood that when a subgroup attacks a question, it might generate only two or three worthy ideas. Knowing that probability in advance will prevent participants from becoming discouraged as they build up the creative muscles necessary to think in this new way. The going can feel slow at first, so reassure participants that by the end of the day, after all the subgroups have met several times, there will be no shortage of good ideas.

Also, whenever possible, share "signpost examples" before the start of each session—real questions previous groups used, along with success stories, to motivate participants and show them how a question-based approach can help.

One last warning: no matter how clever your participants, no matter how insightful your questions, the first five minutes of any subgroup's brainsteering session may feel like typical brainstorming as people test their pet ideas or rattle off superficial new ones. But participants should persevere. Better thinking soon emerges as the subgroups try to improve shallow ideas while sticking to the assigned questions.

6. Wrap it up

By day's end, a typical subgroup has produced perhaps 15 interesting ideas for further exploration. You've been running multiple subgroups simultaneously, so your 20-person team has collectively generated up to 60 ideas. What now?

One thing *not* to do is have the full group choose the best ideas from the pile, as is common in traditional brainstorming. In our experience, your attendees won't always have an executive-level understanding of the criteria and considerations that must go into prioritizing ideas for actual investment. The experience of picking winners can also be demotivating, particularly if the real decision makers overrule the group's favorite choices later.

Instead, have each subgroup privately narrow its own list of ideas to a top few and then share all the leading ideas with the full group to motivate and inspire participants. But the full group shouldn't pick a winner. Rather, close the workshop on a high note that participants won't expect if they're veterans of traditional brainstorming: describe to them exactly what steps will be taken to choose the winning ideas and how they will learn about the final decisions.

7. Follow up quickly

Decisions and other follow-up activities should be quick and thorough. Of course, we're not suggesting that uninformed or insufficiently researched conclusions should be reached about ideas

dreamed up only hours earlier. But the odds that concrete action will result from an idea generation exercise tend to decline quickly as time passes and momentum fades.

The president, provost, and department heads of a US university, for example, announced before a brainstorming workshop that a full staff meeting would be held the morning after it to discuss the various cost-savings ideas it had generated. At the meeting, the senior leaders sorted ideas into four buckets: move immediately to implementation planning, decide today to implement at the closest appropriate time (say, the beginning of the next academic year), assign a group to research the idea further, or reject right away. This process went smoothly because the team that ran the idea generation workshop had done the work up front to understand the criteria senior leaders would use to judge its work. The university began moving ahead on more than a dozen ideas that would ultimately save millions of dollars.

To close the loop with participants, the university made sure to communicate the results of the decisions quickly to everyone involved, even when an idea was rejected. While it might seem demoralizing to share bad news with a team, we find that doing so actually has the opposite effect. Participants are often desperate for feedback and eager for indications that they have at least been heard. By respectfully explaining why certain ideas were rejected, you can help team members produce better ideas next time. In our experience, they *will* participate next time, often more eagerly than ever.

Traditional brainstorming is fast, furious, and ultimately shallow. By scrapping these traditional techniques for a more focused, question-based approach, senior managers can consistently coax better ideas from their teams.



About the Authors

Kevin Coyne and Shawn Coyne, both alumni of McKinsey's Atlanta office, are cofounders and managing directors of the Coyne Partnership, a boutique strategy consulting firm. This article is adapted from their book, *Brainsteering: A Better Approach to Breakthrough Ideas* (HarperCollins, March 2011).

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Notes

¹ For two particularly useful academic studies on the ineffectiveness and inefficiency of traditional brainstorming, see Paul A. Mongeau, *The Brainstorming Myth*, Annual Meeting of the Western States Communication Association, Albuquerque, New Mexico, February 15, 1993; and Frederic M. Jablin and David R. Seibold, "Implications for problem solving groups of empirical research on 'brainstorming': A critical review of the literature," *Southern Speech Communication Journal*, 1978, Volume 43, Number 4, pp. 327–56.

² For a full discussion about identifying and using a portfolio of such right questions in the generation of personal and institutional ideas, see *Brainsteering*, the book from which this article is adapted, as well as Patricia Gorman Clifford, Kevin P. Coyne, and Renée Dye, "Breakthrough thinking from inside the box," *Harvard Business Review*, December 2007, Volume 85, Number 12, pp. 70–78.

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11 MARCH 2011

Jim Newcomer
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Edge-work
Portland, OR USA

As a trained OD professional and facilitator of many successful brainstorming meetings (and participant in a few that were failures), I am appalled at this shallow list. There are ways to insure successful brainstorming meetings, but these people have left out the most fundamental ones.

11 MARCH 2011

James Smith
CEO
Enterprise Management
Group
Seattle, WA USA

I agree, this article represents yet another approach to facilitation, of which there are so many to choose from I don't know how any one figures out which to pick. I liked this approach, their results are impressive, but I'm not much of a fan of the enterprise return from brainstorming.

For over fifteen years, our firm has followed a different approach to generating innovation. Our proven process can best be described as suspending the client's culture and politics for ten weeks. When this step is taken, we have difficulty processing all the input. In one case, after an employee-targeted sacred cow was shot by the CEO, employee input went from 800 in three weeks to 7400 in four and a half weeks, 3900 of which were acted upon for a sustainable \$300 million reduction in SG&A and \$200 million reduction to approved capital.

None of this was facilitated, the process was introduced over one week and the employees wait for something unusual to happen, for example, waiting for a sacred cow to fall, and then no further facilitation is required.

Facilitated brainstorming rarely overcomes the middle management cork in the bottle, so yes, things trickle up the organization, however when you remove the cork entirely from the equation, innovation rushes up the organization.

Human nature always seems to prevail. Managers protect their turf, employees protect their careers. When you remove all the risks, human nature takes over and employees (from the janitor through the officers) just naturally speak up.

The biggest challenge with the facilitation approach is the public nature of the brainstorming. Regardless of how the facilitator represents the safety of open group discussion, each employee will deal with their perception of the risk before stumping for an unpopular idea, regardless the value.

11 MARCH 2011

Joris Claeys
Managing Director
ACCELERATE-gscs |
CAPIX-Asia
Philippines

From brainstorming to brainsteering, or is it facilitation? Anyhow, this article provides some good insights in how to prepare a brainstorming session and what to avoid. Any good change facilitator should have those techniques mastered well.

As Kevin and Shawn point out, the practice is more straight forward than the theory—the examples explain very well what is sought after.

Only surprised the old sticky notes were not mentioned...they still work! But even that requires good facilitation and appropriate selection of participants to the sessions.

11 MARCH 2011

Hrair Mesrobian
professor
Medical College of
Wisconsin
Milwaukee, WI USA

I am hoping Mr Hipple can share these approaches in a little more detail so we can learn from him: CPS, DeBono Six Hats(R), Theory of Constraints, and lastly "TRIZ" Inventive Problem Solving.

11 MARCH 2011

Kenneth Armitage
Lt Commander
Suffolk, East Anglia,
England

This sounds like a combination of brainstorming and team-building. Whatever, such events are better organized away from the workplace and away from every day distractions from pinging telephone calls, e-mails, mobile phones, and even facsimile messages and the general bustle of office or shop floor life. That way participants are more likely to relax and be prepared to get involved. However, before you reach that stage it is imperative to be completely open and honest and spell out the reasons for any such exercise; and, to be successful, senior managers and the facilitator should, for example:

- Have a prepared agenda with the objective or objectives clearly stated.
- Prepare a list of questions to be answered.
- Brief everyone beforehand and tell them how the programme will be conducted and the areas to be covered.
- Invite everyone to write down their ideas in response to each question or, invite round the table, off-the-top of the head comments and have two or three people write down responses or, divide the gathering into groups of say four or five and let them brainstorm their replies and then present their ideas to the gathering.
- Set a time period for groups to come back with ideas in order to keep the process moving along.
- Encourage any kind of response. Sometimes wild ideas have merit and can turn out to be something very worthwhile.
- Emphasize quantity to stimulate lateral thinking.
- Do not worry about detail; you can sort the wheat from the chaff later.
- Encourage contradiction but discourage clear and outright criticism unless constructive.
- Do not be arrogant – by that I mean give the impression you already have the answers and that they are present to confirm your pre-determined views.

11 MARCH 2011

Joy Joseph
Vice President
SymphonyIRI Group
Stamford, CT USA

I completely agree with the authors—effective brainstorming needs preparation (and a process to nurture an effective engagement model). You especially need more structure when it is more “crowd-sourcing” than brainstorming. While this article lays a great foundation for effective brainstorming, I think it doesn’t go into the effectiveness of some tried and tested tools. Maybe the book goes into it. For instance I find Mind-Maps an excellent tool to spur spontaneity of thought, especially in a diverse group. The tool leverages radiant thinking, with a central idea branching off into related, or complimentary concepts. Another great tool is a Prioritization matrix—a large group is bound to produce a myriad of ideas and at some point of time it will become important to rank order them in terms of value versus effort.

11 MARCH 2011

J. Douglas Bate
Co-Founder
The Visterra Group
Boston, MA USA

Brainsteering sounds like a great way to get short-term, incremental, action-oriented ideas that can address tactical problems in any company. The focus on criteria, key questions, knowledgeable participants, and small groups will keep the thinking and ideas in a narrow, feasible range for easy implementation.

Brainstorming should only be used where innovative, game-changing ideas that create new markets and change the basis of competition is required. The open, fast-flowing discussions with a mix of energized people creating a new future will more likely result in longer-term strategy innovation.

There is an important role for both brainsteering and brainstorming in every company. Thanks for highlighting the distinction.

11 MARCH 2011

Paula Wilder
Senior Partner
WilderWeber Leadership
Group
Blacksburg, VA USA

Thanks to the Coyne's for reminding us that brainstorming in and of itself is often random and off-strategy. I agree with many that in today's economic environment, our imaginations are “withering.” What can we do (such as de Bono's tools) to create focused ideas? I will add another proven approach: appreciative inquiry, to create positive images of the future and then innovate around those images—in a structured way that energizes. No stone faces in appreciative inquiry summits!

11 MARCH 2011

Anne Marie van Gerwen
manager Marketing and
Communications
europeana
The Netherlands

What a relief it will be to free ourselves and our staff from some brainstorming cliches that, deep down, we always felt were poor! This will rescue the best ideas from being buried under a pile of mediocre ones.

A suggestion I would like to add is to form groups in such a way that hierarchical and/or political patterns are neutralized. Group members sometimes tend to support ‘good’ ideas or reject other ones for the wrong reasons.

11 MARCH 2011

Deborah Reiff
Principal
ClearPath Resolutions
Boston, MA USA

Another criteria for better brainstorming is using a trained facilitator who is not invested in the outcome. Facilitators can give subtle or blatant cues about which ideas they think are good. When team members see that some ideas are more equal than others they are less likely to be able to think creatively and less likely to share their ideas.

11 MARCH 2011

Jack Hipple
Principal
Innovation-TRIZ
Tampa, FL USA

Though I can't quarrel with your suggestions about improving brainstorming, I am astounded that this is the primary emphasis. Brainstorming is a 60-year-old tool that has been replaced, in order of efficiency and efficacy, by CPS, DeBono Six Hats(R), Theory of Constraints, and lastly “TRIZ” Inventive Problem Solving. If McKinsey is going to comment on creativity and innovation tools, it should focus on what's new

and up to date versus “optimizing,” which is an inherently inefficient process.

11 MARCH 2011

Cicely Brown
VSO Volunteer -
Business Advisor
previously Fantsuam
Foundation
Nigeria

VSO trains all of its volunteers in facilitation techniques designed to both plan and execute development interventions. What’s described above looks like facilitation to me.

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