

## **Brainstorming Process**

Brainstorming is an essential way of generating ideas, however many organizations do it in a way that actually inhibits creativity. In other words, there is a right and wrong way to brainstorm. Therefore, below we will give you what we have found to be the most effective strategy for brainstorming an idea and deriving the best benefits and value from the process. We have developed this from years of using it and teaching it to people and organizations to help them create better results.

Keep in mind that brainstorming should not be a one-time event. It will be needed throughout the process of innovating. Even more importantly, holding group activities on a regular basis will help ensure team members are comfortable with each other, making brainstorming sessions more open and effective.

For this process, make sure that you have a poster board, white board or anything that is big enough to write down ideas so everyone can see. For a large group, have multiple boards.

### **Step 1: Identify What Needs to Be Brainstormed**

What questions, problems, or needs are going to be brainstormed? You can have these prepared in advance or discuss with the team. If you're brainstorming as part of the Design Thinking process, you will have questions to brainstorm that you developed Define phase. Since the brainstorming process can be used at multiple levels of the process of innovating, you may need to identify different areas to be brainstormed—such as the needs of the end user, the source of the true problem, and, of course, possible creative solutions. Each broader topic should be brainstormed separately in order to keep sessions focused.

### **Step 2: Brain Dump (Separately)**

Each participant, *individually*, writes down ALL of their ideas for 5 minutes.

### **Step 3: Set the ground rules for brainstorming**

- No negative comments or labeling anything a “bad idea”. It is often a bad idea that triggers the best idea.
- Do NOT say anything is a great idea (yet) either. Focusing on a good idea can limit creativity. Let them know that after ALL ideas have been shared, those that stand out as the best will be identified and discussed further.
- As a leader, it's especially important for you not to verbally or nonverbally express approval or disapproval of certain ideas. It's best to share your ideas last, as it's too easy for your thoughts to influence others and discourage divergent thinking.
- Truly, the best thing that you can do is just to share all the ideas without any feedback of those idea, until all ideas are exhausted.

### **Step 4: Brainstorm (Collaboratively)**

Remind participants that their brain dump ideas are just a beginning and they are welcome to share any new ideas that come up throughout the process.

Go through the questions one at a time. Have each person share the ideas they came up with. Identify one person to be the scribe who will write down ideas on the white board or poster board (using keywords).

### **Step 5: Elaborate on the Best Ideas**

Once all ideas have been shared, ask all involved to make suggestions for which ideas they feel were the best. Open the floor to explore, debate, and critique the ideas, exploring why they may or may not work. Remind everyone that there are no bad ideas. This part is important because criticism and debate are essential to creating new ideas, as people problem solve and build upon and improve the current ideas. Psychologist Charlan Nemeth explains that actually encouraging constructive criticism pushes members to want to improve on ideas and consider unexplored possibilities. On the other hand, when everyone is trying to be right and ideas are not further critiqued and debated, ideas cannot be developed their initial phase.

Below are great questions for encouraging deeper level brainstorming of ideas that have been shared:

- What else is possible?
- What if we did the opposite?
- If that wouldn't work, what would work?
- If we were starting from scratch with no established processes or norms, what would we do?
- Is there something totally radical we have not thought of?
- What would an 8-year old say?
- What if the obstacle we've identified was removed, what would we do?