# Breakthrough Thinking from the Inside Box

## Introduction

* If you systematically constrain the scope of constrain thinking, people are adept at fully exploring the possibilities, and they can regularly generate lots of good ideas
  + And occasionally some great ideas
* Setting the right constraints is a matter of asking the right kinds of questions
  + Ones that create boxes that are useful, but different, from the boxes your people currently think in

## Why Brainstorming doesn’t work

* Fail to generate a stream of solid ideas because the managers employ two common techniques
  + They encourage their people to go wild and think outside the box
    - People are not very good at unstructured, abstract brainstorming
    - Without guidance, people cannot judge whether they should continue in the direction of their first notion or change course altogether
  + They assign them the task of slicing and dicing the old boxes in new ways
    - Almost always produces only small to middling insights, for different reasons
    - The contents of every database are structured to correspond to insights that are already recognized, not ones that aren’t
  + Customer can tell you if they perceive your product to be inferior to competitors’ offerings in some particular way
    - However, they can rarely tell you whether they need or want a product that they have never seen or imagined

## Asking the right questions

* Once people asked themselves the right question, their ideas flowed rapidly
* One question can generate insights in any business
  + What is the biggest hassle about using or buying our product or service that people unnecessarily tolerate without knowing it?
* The same questions can lead to different ideas
* To develop your own list
  + Ask yourself every time you come across a new business idea that you think is really clever
    - What question would have caused me to see this opportunity first
      * Reverse engineer every great idea or innovation you see
  + Should you want to be more systematic about the search for new questions, you can employ a simple logic tree that down into more tightly defined probes

## Better Orchestrating the Process

* The fact is virtually all brainstorming sessions violate the fundamentals of how human beings actually think and work together
* Step with what we know about how people work best in groups
  + Bound the range of acceptable ideas, then select and tailor the questions accordingly
    - Many questions after brainstorming session can be avoided if you take the time to clarify what constitutes the criteria for, and boundaries of, a good idea in your particular case
    - Then consider the particular requirements of the problem you are trying to solve
      * That will help you avoid asking question questions that will lead to the same insight
    - When choosing among possible questions, go for those that approach the problem from angles that are as far as possible from the way you approached it in the past
    - Once you have settled these parameters, you will be able to tailor the language of your questions to best fit your specific goals and constraints
  + Select participants who can produce original insights
    - You always have to invite some people for political reasons who will not contribute much
      * But make sure there are enough other people who can contribute
  + Ensure that everyone is fully engaged
    - You must accept that under normal brainstorming circumstances most of your attendees will care less about the success of the meeting than you do
      * Don’t be shy about resorting to parlor tricks
  + Structure the meeting to ensure social norms work for you, not against you
    - In almost all meetings of ten or more people, the social norm is to keep quiet or to speak only a minimum amount
    - First, in any group of four, the social norm is for everyone to participate, so no one can hide without seeming uncooperative
    - Second, if there are five subgroups instead of one combined group, five people rather than just one are offering their ideas at any given time
    - Finally, put all those pushy people who feel compelled to dominate the discussion in the same group
  + Focus every discussion using your preselected questions
    - At the outset of the meeting, explicitly state the ground rules you have decided on
      * Whether you want big ideas or incremental improvements, what the budget is, and so on
    - Once you have divided people up into their small groups, give each a single highly focused task
    - Have them spend 20 to 30 minutes discussing one question and report back to everyone the best ideas that come from just that question
    - Typically happen
      * The first five minutes of each session sound like any other brainstorming meeting
      * But then the participants return to the better idea and refine them
      * Thoughtful variants emerge
  + Do not rely solely on one brainstorming session
    - Ignores how people actually think and work together
    - Some individuals don’t work well in a workshop format, no matter how well structured the session is
    - Brainstorming should be a multifaceted process, not a single event
      * You might assign someone before the workshop to gather data
      * Need to schedule a follow-up meeting or two
      * Just need to provide a way to gather additional information from individuals after the session
  + Narrow the list of ideas to the ones you will seriously investigate right away
    - Nothing is more deflating to the participants of a brainstorming session than leaving at the end with no confidence that anything will happen as a result of their efforts
      * Don’t push off the task of sorting the ideas to later
      * Do it right then and there