FIVE FALLACIES IN BRAINSTORMING

Over the last 30 years, I have seen Brainstorming move from a rather specialised activity, practised in advertising agencies and a few other environments, into more general use as a management technique. Or at least the *word* brainstorming has; the *practice* is another matter.

Brainstorming has become a generic term for any attempt to generate new ideas in an environment of suspending judgement. It tends to include elements of other techniques, such as de Bono's lateral thinking and Synectics (a much more powerful set of techniques). The semantic confusion may not matter (except to specialists like me!). However, what is actually done in the name of brainstorming often falls far short of the standards established by its founder and its developer (Alex Osborne and Sidney Parnes).

From my observation of a large number of brainstorming sessions, I have identified five underlying fallacies that commonly undermine its effectiveness. They are:

1. Suspending Judgement is Easy

2. You Have to Define the Problem Correctly

3. You need to Understand the Problem before you can Contribute Ideas

4. The Purpose of Brainstorming is to Generate Instant New Solutions

5. After Brainstorming you Screen the Ideas Into Good/Bad - or Cluster Them in Groups of Similar Ideas.

Each of these is examined below

1. Suspending Judgement is Easy

It *sounds* easy, but making judgements (in the form of decisions) is such an integral part of everyday life that it is not easy to get out of the habit even temporarily. With a good facilitator acting as a referee, it is relatively easy to prevent *public* judgements and that is certainly beneficial in providing a relatively safe environment in which participants can offer ideas without fear of criticism.

However, participants do not suspend judgement *internally* – they continue to *think* and *listen* judgementally. If, at the end of a period of brainstorming ideas, you ask the group "Did anyone have any other ideas which were too impractical/illegal/immoral or just plain crazy to put forward, almost invariably someone will respond hesitantly "Well I thought of…". Others will quickly follow, starting off a new round of ideas, which will have more originality than the first round. Similarly, if idea stimulation techniques such as Synectics excursions are introduced, a fresh batch of new ideas will emerge.

People tend to assume that they should only offer sensible ideas, but these are unlikely to be new. They are known to be sensible because they have been tried before and therefore cannot be new! As Einstein says, "if at first an idea is not absurd, there is no hope for it".

Of course there may be situations where a known solution can be transferred from one member of a group who knows it to another who does not – and this can be useful – but this is more in the realm of advising than idea generation.

2. You Have to Define the Problem Correctly

This is true when tackling a closed-ended problem (a 'deviation from the norm' as Kepner and Tregoe describe it) to which there is a known solution. If the car will not start and you want to get it going, you need to find out whether the problem is lack of fuel, faulty connections, flat battery, dirty spark plugs, etc. Once the problem has been identified, the solution is usually obvious.

However, in open-ended situations, where the objective is to create a *new solution*, it is inappropriate to seek to identify a correct definition (which is essentially a judgmental activity, in conflict with the suspending judgement principle of brainstorming). Instead, it makes sense to brainstorm alternative views of what the problem *might* be and generate ideas to solve any or all of them.

De Bono's story of the problem of waiting times in the lobby of a multi-storey office block is a case in point. Engineers were trying to speed up the lifts or re-program them to increase the throughput. After a large mirror was installed on one wall, complaints about waiting times ceased. With hindsight, it could be said that the *real* problem was not the waiting time but the boredom, which was relieved by the mirror! But that could not be known in advance of the experiment.

3. You need to Understand the Problem before you can Contribute Ideas

The perceived need to understand the problem stems from the urge only to contribute 'good' ideas. It is another facet of the tendency to make internal judgements and filter out any ideas which might attract criticism or ridicule.

However, the whole purpose of suspending judgement is to open up the topic to *all* ideas – by definition, there are no good or bad ideas in an idea generation session run under brainstorming conditions. An *approximate* understanding of the problem is all that is needed to trigger *approximately* relevant ideas, all of which have the potential to open up new lines of thought, which may develop, ultimately into feasible, attractive and new solutions.

The initial briefing on the problem is intended to trigger ideas, not to bring the participants to the same understanding as that of the problem owner. If they see the problem in the same way, they are less likely to produce ideas that are new to the problem owner – a different perspective is an asset not to be wasted.

The attempt to understand the problem 'correctly' usually takes the form of a series of questions to the problem owner. Like any interrogation, it can become uncomfortable

for the person on the receiving end of the questions (even though they may be intended helpfully). The questions often mask ideas, as participants try to protect themselves from potential criticism or rejection of their ideas, by checking in advance that the idea is feasible.

4. The Purpose of Brainstorming is to Generate Instant New Solutions

New solutions are the *ultimate* objective of brainstorming. *Instant* new solutions can happen, but they are very rare – like a hole-in-one in golf. Sometimes, as noted above there can be a transfer of a *known* solution from one person to who knows it to another who does not, but that should not require a brainstorming session.

The assumption that instant new solutions are required has the effect of restricting the flow of ideas – participants are reluctant to voice any idea unless they feel it might be a solution.

New solutions are usually 'grown' from a starting idea that is no more like the finished article than a caterpillar looks like a butterfly, or a seed looks like a plant.

5. After Brainstorming you Screen the Ideas Into Good/Bad - or Cluster Them in Groups of Similar Ideas

This practice is another facet of the belief that it is possible to brainstorm instant *new* solutions. Though possible, it is very unlikely. So the screening process is likely to yield a short-list of good ideas, which turn out not to be new. It is hardly surprising, since the 'good' ideas are those that are known to work – by definition, not new! And the end result is disappointment with brainstorming: "we generated all those ideas and at the end of the day we didn't get anything new"

The alternative is to view the brainstormed ideas not as end points but as starting points for the exploration of new avenues (they are called Springboards in Synectics and it is a good metaphor for a taking-off point). The selection of which avenues to explore is not a logical but an intuitive choice – there is no way of knowing in advance where a new avenue will lead to (because it is *new* and therefore there is no past data to work with)

So the criteria for selection are newness and appeal – if it feels good, pursue it. Bill Gordon, co-founder of Synectics, calls it the 'hedonic response', that pleasurable feeling of "I think I might be on to something here". The choice is followed by the Synectics process of Idea Development, in which ideas are evaluated constructively in terms of what is attractive about them and how they need to be improved or replaced to move them towards a solution. (A full description is given in the Innovators Handbook, pp. 60-67)

The practice of clustering ideas into groups of similar ideas (often using post-it notes) is similarly an attempt to introduce logic and order into what is essentially an intuitive and possibly disorderly process. It has the further disadvantage of burying potentially news ideas in a generalised cluster of ideas in the same area ('new wine in old bottles'). Sometimes newness is achieved by breaking down existing categories

One objective of clustering is to ensure that no ideas are lost. My experience is that if you follow the intuitive route, most of the ideas (or useful elements of them) will be picked up anyway in an organic, not mechanical process. And at the end of a session, you can always go back over the initial ideas to check that nothing important has been overlooked

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