Building New Boxes: How to Run Brainstorming Sessions That Work

Brainstorming often fails not because of the process itself, but because of how it's used. Blaming the tool instead of the technique won't solve the underlying issues. Managers often mistakenly think that gathering people, offering snacks, and encouraging "out of the box" thinking will spur creativity. However, this approach typically results in unproductive sessions.

Effective brainstorming requires structure:

1. **Framing Questions Effectively:** Focus on narrow, concrete questions rather than broad ones. Effective questions are specific and easy to understand in context, helping participants know where to start.
2. **Creating Conditions for Creativity**: Assemble diverse groups, change the environment, and ensure full participation, making everyone comfortable sharing ideas.
3. **Doubting Existing Assumptions**: Start by challenging existing beliefs and assumptions within the organization. Identifying which "boxes" need reevaluation is crucial for creative breakthroughs.
4. Introducing New Mental Models: Bring potential new frameworks or "boxes" to guide ideation, balancing practicality and creativity.
5. **Following Up Post-Session**: Ensure that ideas are prioritized and followed up on. Consensus may not always be possible immediately; allow ideas to percolate and re-engage participants later.

Nintendo's evolution from a playing-card company to a leader in video games exemplifies the importance of questioning foundational assumptions and shifting the organizational mindset to embrace new possibilities.

Questions	New Questions
How can we improve our brand image in the Indian market?	How can we get a 25-year old woman in Mumbai to rave about us to her friends?
How can we come up with new marketing ideas for our airline?	How can we ensure that our airline is the first thing every businessperson in Los Angeles and New York thinks of when booking a trip?
	How can we ensure that every new Expedia customer sets his or her Web browser's home page to our website?

Strategies for Effective Brainstorming

1. Frame Questions Effectively
  - Narrow and concrete questions help focus ideation.
  - Use visceral, context-specific queries.
	2. Create Conditions for Creativity:
	  - Gather diverse participants.
	  - Change the routine and environment.
	  - Encourage full and comfortable participation.

3. Doubt Existing Assumptions:
  - Identify and challenge current beliefs and assumptions.
  - Determine which mental models need reevaluation.
	4. Introduce New Mental Models:
	  - Provide new frameworks to guide thinking.
	  - Balance between practicality and creativity.

5. Follow Up Post-Session:
  - Prioritize and act on ideas generated.
  - Allow for ongoing ideation and re-engagement.	

By designing brainstorming sessions thoughtfully and challenging existing assumptions, organizations can foster meaningful creativity and innovation.

RESOURCE <https://www.bcg.com/publications/2013/innovation-strategic-planning-building-new-boxes>

It is up to us to interpret the "facts"

Thought exercise: is a given megatrend an opportunity or threat? It could be either, depending on your mindset. Complete this exercise by filling in the blanks, challenging yourself to interpret the "facts", which many see as threats, as opportunities.

Threat		Opportunity
Aging demographics	**Aging population**	New "silver market"
Rising health-care costs	**Health-care spending**	New health-care services and settings
Urban congestion	**Urbanization**	New opportunities/ revolution
Economic loss and human impact	**Sustainability**	Growing power and infrastructure needs
Near-term price and energy volatility	**Energy price volatility**	Understanding the trend/consumption/alternatives
High competition in rapidly evolving area	**Smart devices**	Growth in market for it use
Global warming	**Climate change**	Making alternatives to renewable resources

Shifts in our mental models enable us to solve problems and pursue opportunities

Mental models, paradigms, or the way that we think about things help us shortcut thinking to arrive at decisions quickly, but they can also inhibit positive change, keeping us stuck in old ways of thinking.
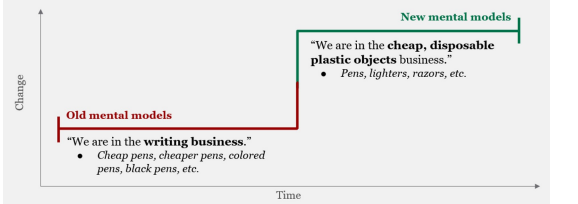
Small, incremental change in our mental models doesn't always yield the change we need; we need to actively challenge our assumptions to drive meaningful change.

Let's review some examples.

Study 1: BIC
It used to manufacture plastic stationary like pens, cheaper pens, plastic pens, etc.
In a brainstorming session, they could have proposed models like multi-color pens, single pens with multiple colors, etc.
However, they doubt their existing model "plastic" and "cheap" and invented products like cheap plastic disposable razors, lighters, pens, etc.

New mental models
"We are in the **cheap, disposable plastic objects** business."
- *Pens, lighters, razors, etc.*

Old mental models
"We are in the **writing business**."
- *Cheap pens, cheaper pens, colored pens, black pens, etc.*

Thus, they shifted mental models

Another study includes:

Low-cost airlines shifted prevailing airline paradigms to disrupt the aviation industry
Fill in the blanks.

New mental models
Airlines can operate:
- *single model of aircraft*
- *sold online*
- *user's choice of seat selection*
- *cheap pricing*
- *pay for what you want (i.e. not including all services and benefits; rather adhering to the user's choice)*

Old mental models
Airlines can operate:
- *many types of aircraft*
- *convenient, major airports*
- *hub-and-spoke model*
- *all-inclusive pricing*
- *pre-assigned seating*
- *sold via travel agents*