

Brainstorming Works Best if People Scramble For Ideas on Their Own

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

There are plenty of other reasons why such sessions, intended to harvest good ideas, are often the source of bad ones. For starters, there's self-consciousness. "We sit there looking embarrassed like we're all new to a nudist colony," says Joe Polidoro, who has worked for a variety of banks. There's also the problem that creativity and its mulish muse can't be scheduled between, say, 9:15 and 9:45. Says Kate Lee, who used to work for General Electric: "I'm more mercurial than that."

teams aren't necessarily so great. "There are so many things people do in management because they think it's good, but there's no evidence for it," says Paul B. Paulus, a professor of psychology at the University of Texas at Arlington. "Teamwork is one example. Brainstorming is another." Prof. Paulus conducted research on the number and quality of ideas of four people brainstorming together versus four people brainstorming by themselves. Typically, group brainstormers perform at about half the level they would if they brainstormed alone.

That's why if you don't carefully follow procedures, you risk wasting a lot of energy. "If you leave groups to their own devices, they're going to do a very miserable job," says Prof. Paulus. But if people brainstorm alone after the group brainstorming session, it can be productive, he says, adding, "It's ironic: You tap the benefits of groups alone. Everyone still presumes the best brainstorming is group brainstorming."

FULL TEXT

SOME BRAINSTORMING sessions get off to a shaky start because the participants subscribe to a tenet that is provably false: "There's no such thing as a bad idea."

But there are plenty of other reasons why such sessions, intended to harvest good ideas, are often the source of bad ones. For starters, there's self-consciousness. "We sit there looking embarrassed like we're all new to a nudist colony," says Joe Polidoro, who has worked for a variety of banks. There's also the problem that creativity and its mulish muse can't be scheduled between, say, 9:15 and 9:45. Says Kate Lee, who used to work for General Electric: "I'm more mercurial than that."

John Clark, a former university dean of engineering, says brainstorming sessions come in handy to distribute blame in the event of failure. But in his experience, most often someone hijacks the topic at hand, tries to prove everyone else wrong, works to impress the superiors who are present, or just plain blathers for his own enjoyment. "I can't remember a single instance where a group produced a really creative idea," he says.

In fact, great brainstorming sessions are possible, but they require the planning of a state dinner, plenty of rules, and the suspension of ego, ingratiation and political railroading. Hosts have to hope that people won't expend creative energy trying to tell others their ideas are bad without actually telling them that – admittedly a real business skill. And they have to cross their fingers that the session won't deteriorate into what some people call

"blamestorming" or "coblabberation," where you get nowhere or settle on something mediocre to be done with it.

THE POPULARITY of brainstorming results in part from corporate America's knee-jerk faith in teams. In fact, the father of brainstorming, advertising executive Alex Osborn, advocated using people to storm a corporate problem "in commando fashion." And let yourself be labeled a "nonteam player," and you might as well start your own one-person consultancy.

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David Perkins, a professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, warns that sometimes group sessions can result in one person's bad idea tainting and limiting the range of others' ideas. "The best way to get good ideas is to get people to write them down privately and then bring them in," he says. You want group diversity but no more than five to seven people or you risk ending up with "coblabberation."

"If you stand back and think about [brainstorming], it's plainly inefficient," says Prof. Perkins. But, he says, "sometimes you take the brainstorming approach because you want everyone to feel they have a voice."

THAT SHOULDN'T be confused, though, with actually having a voice, says Christopher Holland, a policy analyst for the Australian government. "These things are usually designed to give people the idea that they have input into decisions when the decisions have already been decided."

When the goal really is ideas, some companies resort to hiring facilitators. Outsiders don't have political dogs in the fight and can, as Bill Hall learned, make people "get back in line." The last time Mr. Hall tried to conduct a session himself on how to save his organization money, "it quickly degenerated into a worthless day," he says.

Paul Baard, a professor of organizational psychology at Fordham University's School of Business, suggests starting off like this: "No one, present or not here, is going to be hurt during this process. We will not be using ridicule"

For Martha McGuire, a senior vice president at a bank, the majority of brainstorming sessions arrive at obvious conclusions, or worse. "You end up with the more pedestrian solution that you would have had had you not held the session," she says.

Most of the details of the brainstorming sessions Ms. McGuire has participated in are a blur. The exception: a session in which her colleagues found a way to syndicate a huge credit facility despite prickly risks. And that one was memorable because it actually succeeded. So how many didn't? "It just feels like there were a lot," she says.

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