

Brainstorming in a Group

There are never too many minds during a brainstorming session. Raw brainstorming is always most successful when several people get together with sleeves rolled up and minds open. Where one person may hit his head on a wall is the exact place another person finds a window of opportunity.

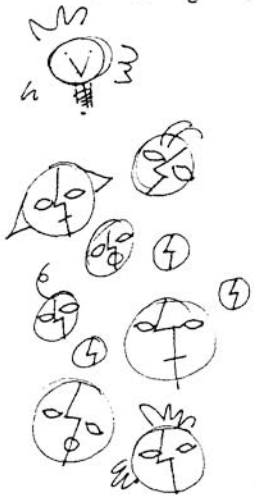
Verbalizing ideas in a group is the best way to take ideas beyond what you thought to be possible.

Remember, we are discussing brainstorming in a group—creating creativity. We *aren't* discussing the creation of a committee to evaluate ideas or approaches. I am suggesting that you assemble a team to generate ideas, because it seems the best ideas are generated by groups. On the other hand, ideas are best evaluated by only a few and, ideally, by only one person.

There's a real art to team brainstorming. It's a lot like group therapy. You must keep the ball rolling, pick up steam, bounce thoughts off each other to facilitate great ideas. Here are some basics to keep in mind while brainstorming in a group:

- Everyone in the room is an equal participant. No one is the boss, and no one is stupid. Mutual trust and respect for all group members will produce better results.
- No ideas are bad. There is no judgment or evaluation of ideas. All ideas are significant and will lead to others.
- Record all thoughts, statements or ideas. These sessions are best recorded by one person on a roll of paper hung on the wall for everyone to view. This way, old ideas are as close as the new ones emerging. Further, if something is not recorded accurately, at least one person will notice and correct the error.
- Start the brainstorming session with an examination of the problem. Developing a verbal description of the problem will start the ball rolling.
- Always restate the problem in terms other than those in which it was originally described. This causes you to look at individual words as a source of inspiration.
- List words that have anything to do with the issues at hand as a means to discover and explore possible paths to new ideas.
- Silence is bad, noise is good. When the room is silent, there are no ideas and you are pursuing a dead-end thought. Move on.
- Everyone participates. Group dynamics affect different people in different ways. Remember the quiet kids in the back of the classroom who didn't raise their hands? Many of those kids had, and still have, the most creative minds. They're simply afraid of

everyone
participates



assign a facilitator.

looking foolish. If everyone in the group plays fair and remains open, these people will participate. If they don't participate, call on them. Ask their opinions.

- Assign a facilitator. Notice I avoided the label of "leader." The facilitator is someone who keeps the group talking. She is not the evaluator, nor the one with all of the ideas. The best facilitators are often the people who are generally quiet when in a group. A quiet person serving as facilitator will be more motivated to contribute.
- Brainstorm when everyone is fresh. Don't do it the first thing in the morning when some people are trying to wake up. Give them time to get the cobwebs out of their heads. Don't brainstorm at the end of the day when everyone is tired and drained.
- Avoid interruptions. Have someone outside the session cover the phone and take messages. Do not, I repeat, do *not* interrupt the session for anything.
- Keep the tone of the session light and playful. If the room lacks fun and laughter, chances are the ideas are dull, uninspired and predictable.

Create a Haven for Innovation

A sterile environment begets sterile thinking. You can only be innovative where you feel comfortable and nourished. A creative haven has two essential characteristics:

1. It's fun, comfortable, physically enjoyable and stimulating.
2. It's open to risk and has no hierarchy; it's nurturing and tolerant.

These characteristics often are missing from organizations with rigid structures, whose attitudes tend to be, "Risk is bad and safe is good." On the other hand, small organizations where team members are creative peers make it easier to be creative.

Why is having a haven for creativity so important? Almost everyone who has achieved success as a designer will say that success hinges on having self-confidence and no fear of failure. In other words, they can take risks without criticism or judgment. Talk to any creative professional, and you will learn that the freedom to take risks is the fundamental reason their work stands out.

Every designer needs a haven for innovation. If you work for someone else and find you're afraid to take risks or have your ideas judged, you won't do your best work. If you work alone but don't present your most creative work because you're afraid of your client's reactions, you deny yourself the haven you need.

How do you create a haven for creativity? First, get rid of negativity. *No* is not part of the language of creativity. *No* breeds fear. "You can't do this." "I don't like that." "That doesn't make sense." "The client won't go for that." All these negative reactions break the creative spirit.



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Instead, encourage further development of potentially risky ideas.

Don't edit until the brainstorming session is over. Judgment and evaluation are big parts of the creative process, but they have no place in the brainstorming process. Judgment simply stifles further creative thinking. Remember during brainstorming, no idea is a bad idea. (We'll discuss the timing of and rationale for judgment and evaluation on pages 82–83.)

Creative havens are fun, interactive, lively and interesting. Stimulation in the forms of books, magazines, visuals, sound and music all make for innovative havens—and innovative people. If you don't like the people you work with, you're in a heap of trouble (especially if you work alone). Creativity demands a positive point of view, and the people around you determine that view.

SOMETIMES CREATIVITY COMES IN THE FORM OF THE SMALL “AHA,” NOT A LARGE ONE.

Kris Clemons, Gerhardt & Clemons, Inc.

Look for the Creative Potential in All Projects, Big and Small

Not all projects offer obvious opportunities for creativity. It's easy to create for a creative project such as a poster, a book cover or an invitation. But try to be creative with an order form. A truly innovative designer treats all projects as opportunities for creativity. Even projects for difficult clients with closed minds should be treated with a uniquely creative touch.

My design firm was working with a client group on a registration package for an annual meeting. The ideas we presented were conceptual but way beyond anything they had done for past meetings. They liked our ideas but were uncomfortable with the aggressive conceptual approach. “The audience isn't ready for change,” they said. I asked how our approach was different. They listed numerous incidental concerns such as the organization, format, and presentation on the page.

They also mentioned the aggressive integration of the concept. It made the client group nervous. “Just give them the information,” they grumbled. “And the registration form; it's different.” With that as a lead, we focused the conversation on the form. We had carefully considered how to make it easy to use and how best to organize the information on it. Explaining that aspect to the client group let us demonstrate the amount of thought that went into the whole piece. We walked them through the reader's process and the reader's need to understand the questions being asked. We could see them changing their tune as they realized how much easier it was to understand this “different” form. The other issues were never discussed further. And it turned out to be the client's most successful meeting to date.