**Professional Services
Capability Framework:
Seeing the Bigger Picture**

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How to Run an Effective Brainstorming Session

Brainstorming is a useful approach to generating new ideas, but there are many factors that can get in the way of a successful brainstorming session. For example:

- Lack of focus or clarity of purpose
- Inviting the wrong people
- Participants who feel disempowered (or too empowered)
- Too much criticism too soon
- Failing to prepare participants for what's being asked of them Poor facilitation
- Getting off topic
- Failing to follow up

To plan for a successful brainstorming session with optimal outcomes, it's important to look ahead, choose the right people to participate and facilitate, and know exactly what you want your outcome to be.

Here are some top tips for brainstorming effectively, covering what to consider before your session, and how to structure your session effectively and troubleshoot any problems arising.

A. Before scheduling your brainstorming session

Here is a list of five important things to consider initially so you set up your brainstorming session with the maximum chance for success:

1.   Be sure you really want to brainstorm

Brainstorming can be a great way to help your team to feel engaged in the process. When you invite brainstorming, you're letting people know you're open to their ideas. But before you jump in, be sure brainstorming is really appropriate at this point in the project.

Are you truly open to new ideas, or actually trying to get buy-in for your own view? If you actually have all the project details in hand, brainstorming can be counter-productive. That's because it sets up an unrealistic expectation that employees will have a say in the project's direction.

2.   Write down your brainstorming goal(s)

Remember, you need goals both for the session itself and for follow-up. Everything you do before, during, and after your brainstorming session should refer back to your goals.

3.   Have clarity on the input you want

Be sure you know what kind of brainstorming input you're aiming for and what the interpersonal dynamics are likely to be. When you know that, you can select the best brainstorming method for your particular needs.

For example, if you're planning to include your entire team—managers, implementers, and support staff. For example you might choose to use a "[brainwriting](#)" approach. This method allows individuals to write down their thoughts rather than speak aloud. In some cases, this can reduce tension and lower concerns about being seen as "foolish" in front of peers or managers.

4.   Invite the appropriate participants

Based on your understanding of the goals, purpose and process, make up a list of invitees. Do your best to be sure that the list includes individuals who are directly involved with managing and implementing the project you have in mind.

B. Run your brainstorming session effectively

1.   Set the Scene

Before you start brainstorming, give your group the information they need. Be sure to cover the following:

- Set the scene by presenting your goals, describing the brainstorming process and expectations for activities following the meeting, and clearly outlining the timings for the session and beyond.

- Share critical information that your team will need: timing of the session, location of bathrooms, plans for breaks, anticipated completion time, assumptions regarding use of cell phones etc. If you don't provide this information, there's a good chance your participants will spend much of their time trying to get the answers from one another!

- Tell participants where to sit: bear in mind that it's often a good idea to split up social and/or work groups, both to increase creativity and to reduce people talking shop in the corners.

- If you are facilitating, explain your own role.

- Ask participants to set rules for the day. This may include the "hold your critique" rule to stop people critiquing ideas instead of generating radical ideas, limits on speaking time, limits on critical comments, mobile phone use.

2. Start the main part of the session

Now with the scene set, goals and ground rules in place, it's time to begin. Here are a few actions to get started and move the brainstorming session forward:

Action 1. Start with an icebreaker

In brainstorming, everyone is equal. Icebreaking sessions are a good way to establish this idea by playing games in which everyone has an equal role.

Icebreakers can include games such as "if you could choose a superpower, which would it be, and why?" or "what animal best represents you, and why?" The key to success with such icebreakers is to include everyone

Action 2. Start easily

Start the brainstorming process with a low-risk, project-related question that allows everyone to toss in an idea without serious concerns. Be sure everyone speaks up at least once. For example, ask "if you could ask a genie to solve our problem or complete our project, etc., then what would you ask the genie to do?" You may discover that people have very different ideas about what to wish for and it's those different ideas you're searching for through the brainstorming process.

Action 3. Record everything

Ensure everyone takes notes

3. Troubleshoot brainstorming problems

As you get into the brainstorming process, you may run into one or more common challenges:

Problem 1. Drying up or becoming repetitive

At some point, your group will have a hard time coming up with additional ideas. Sometimes that's because they've really expressed all their thoughts. Often, though, they may need a coffee break or a little time to think. If a break doesn't result in additional creativity, try going back to a few of the ideas that have already been expressed. Does anyone have an idea that relates to or builds on one of these?

Problem 2. Not enough or too much creativity

Too little creative thinking or too much off-the-charts imagination can be problematic to effective brainstorming. While it's great to think creatively, ridiculous suggestions

intended to get a laugh (*Let's deal with the Martians instead of our clients!*) can steer things off topic. By the same token, extremely conservative ideas (*Let's do what we did last time, but give it a red trim instead of a blue trim.*) can stifle creative thinking.

Use your facilitation skills to steer people back on course. Maybe the Martians aren't an option, but should we be thinking about reaching out to a completely different group of clients? Maybe trim isn't the issue, but design may be. How can we expand our graphical approach?

<u>Problem 3. Getting off topic or lost in the weeds</u>

It's very easy for discussion to steer itself away from vision and ideation and into practical issues. For example, "*It's great to say you want new sales material, but we'd need more staff to create that material and...*" or "*We tried that idea five years ago, and it didn't work because...*"

These discussions *will* be important as you move from brainstorming into working groups, so let your team know this. Ask them to make notes and volunteer to be part of the working group that addresses practical issues such as staffing, logistics, etc.

<u>Problem 4. Participation issues</u>

Having one person monopolise the discussion or several people "opting out" of the discussion are both problematic. Every group has its outspoken and shy members, but brainstorming requires universal participation.

If you anticipate or see a problem with certain people dominating or avoiding involvement, change your approach. Try using a round-robin technique in which each individual is asked to present their ideas, one after the other. To avoid the problem of people spending all their time waiting to speak, call on people in an unpredictable sequence.

<u>Problem 5. Boredom</u>

When people get bored, off-topic chatting, mobile phone use, and doodling become more interesting than the brainstorming itself. You have a few options for avoiding boredom. First, of course, keep your brainstorming sessions to a reasonable length. Two days of brainstorming can leave anyone bored to tears. Second, vary your procedures. Rather than simply asking for ideas for several hours straight, try using multiple brainstorming techniques such as brainwriting, starbursting, etc. If you still see restlessness in the ranks, consider the possibility that it's time for a break.

4. Rank your ideas

When the brainstorming ends, the planning process gets started. Your next move will be to select the best ideas for action. To do that, you'll need to facilitate a discussion that includes shifting topics into good/better/best categories. Depending upon the size of the group and your particular needs, you could break the group into smaller teams and ask each team to rank ideas, or point to each idea on the board and ask the entire group to vote on which they like best. Then ask the group to review the ones with the highest scores.

5. Plan Your Next Steps

The whole point of brainstorming is to develop ideas for action. Once the best ideas are selected, you'll need to discuss how to take the ideas to the next level. To do this, most managers:

- Set up working groups to think through problems and logistics. Each group should include individuals with solid experience in the area they're addressing as well as people who will actually be doing the work.

- Create a timeline with clear objectives, goals, and milestones.

- Plan meeting times and discuss assigned tasks for each meeting.

What should working groups be able to do? Your choice will depend on how detailed the ideas are, whether the ideas will need funding or resources, for example, or whether they can be done with existing budget and funding or need more senior sign off or discussions with other teams first.

Conclusion

You now know how to brainstorm and run a group session. To be successful, you'll need to set clear goals, prepare carefully, communicate clearly, troubleshoot as needed, and follow up on your brainstorming success.