Effective Brainstorming Guide

The ability to facilitate effective brainstorming is a crucial leadership skill that every leader should have in their toolbox. Brainstorming helps teams innovate, fosters collaboration, and increases buy-in from all team members. With that much power and potential, it's important to get brainstorming right.

Part 1: Posture and Prep Work

Supplies:
1. Sticky notes: 1 pad per person
2. Pens: 1 per person
3. A table, white board, or blank wall to post lots of sticky notes to.

Decide on a decision-making structure from the list below:
1. The group will brainstorm ideas and leave the narrowing down of the ideas and decision on the top idea to someone else.
2. The group will brainstorm ideas, narrows the field as a group, but not decide on the top idea. The top idea will be decided by someone else.
3. The group will brainstorm ideas, narrow the field as a group, then decide on the best idea as a group.

Decide on expectations. I suggest the following, though you may have others:
1. Full engagement, no distractions (email, phones, coming late, leaving early)
2. All ideas will be accepted at this stage.
3. We will not critique or analyze ideas at this time.
4. This can be fun and light-hearted as long as it doesn't become distracting.
5. People are not judged for the quality or quantity of their ideas

Before you meet, communicate with everyone the following. Doing this in advance will help people to prepare their thought and be in the right mindset for the meeting.
1. Thank them for helping.
2. The decision-making structure
3. Expectations
4. Clearly articulate the topic(s) that will be brainstormed around

Part 2: The Brainstorm

First, remind everyone again of the expectations, decision-making structure and topic(s) you are going to brainstorm.

Give everyone a pad of sticky notes and a pen.

Present the topic to be brainstormed. Give people space to ask clarifying questions if they do not understand the topic.

Say this: "I'm going to set a timer for 3 minutes. During this time, everyone is to write as many ideas as they have on sticky notes – one idea per sticky note. At the end of the 3 minutes, I will collect them all."

Start the timer. Let them work. At the end, collect the sticky notes.

* Continue to the following page

Post all the sticky notes on a wall or spread them out on the table.

Say this: "Please take 2 minutes of silence to read all of the sticky notes but do not talk about them."

Once the two minutes is up, ask if anyone needs any clarity around any of the ideas or wants to explore them briefly. This isn't a time to hash them out completely or critique them.

Work as a team to group the sticky notes into common ideas, duplicates, or themes. This should reduce your big mess of sticky notes down into smaller piles. This should be a conversational and explorative process. It is just as much about generating conversations and new ideas as it is about the organization of existing ideas.

At this point, if you wanted to do another round of sticky note submissions, grouping, and discussion, you could.

Depending on your decision-making structure, proceed with the corresponding option:

1. If your decision-making structure involves no further input from them, they are done.

2. If your decision-making structure involves further input but they will not make the final decision, say this: "Take a blank stick note and rip it in half. These are your two votes. Place them next to the idea or group of ideas that you believe are the best."

3. If your decision-making structure involves the team making the final decision, say this: "Take a blank stick note and rip it in half. These are your two votes. Place them next to the idea or group of ideas that you believe are the best."

   Once ideas have been voted on, select the 2-5 ideas with the most votes. Say this: "We are now going to take a few minutes to discuss and debate the top-voted ideas. We are not deciding at this time but simply exploring the ideas. After each idea has been discussed, we will vote on a final decision." Begin discussing the top-voted ideas you selected.

   After discussion, it's time to vote. Say this: "Take a blank sticky note and place it next to the idea that you think is best. You may only vote once and you may only choose from the top ideas we have been discussing. The idea with the most votes will be our final decision." Let everyone vote.

You're done! Collect everything. You may choose to snap a photo of the sticky notes, write them all down, or just keep them on the display for a while. Regardless of the method, figure out a way to hold onto these ideas and the polling.

Thank everyone for participating.

Part 3: Continue Growing in Collaborative Leadership

We want you to know there is a lot more where this came from!

If this activity was particularly helpful, you may be interested in our module on Collaborative Leadership. It is an incredible resource to help teams grow in their ability to listen, ask questions, and work together to be more than the sum of their parts.