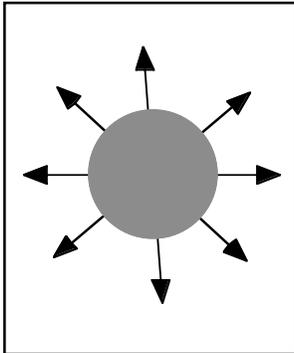


Brainstorming



Overview, Description, and Purpose

Brainstorming is a tool for generating options. It involves a deliberate, open-ended search for a large number of possibilities to address or deal with tasks (situations, opportunities, or areas of concern) that require new possibilities or different perspectives. This tool emphasizes producing many options, a variety of different options, and options that are unusual or original. Brainstorming relies on the basic principle of deferred judgment; it is not just

another name for a conversation, discussion, “bull session,” or debate. Although the Brainstorming tool is most often used in group settings guided by an experienced group leader or facilitator, individuals can also use the tool successfully on their own.

The Brainstorming tool is useful in the following situations:

- When you have an open ended task or issue;
- When you need many options;
- When you are searching for novelty;
- When you want to consider a variety of ideas;
- When you want “synergy,” or the leverage of the combined perspectives of all members of a group.

Tips and Suggestions

These suggestions may help you to use the Brainstorming tool successfully.

1. Engage in a brief (2 minutes or less) “warm up” exercise or activity, using a light, fun topic. e.g., listing ways to improve a familiar, everyday object.
2. Groupings of 5-8 people are ideal; it is usually helpful to divide larger groups into smaller sub-groups or teams.
3. A semi-circle arrangement allows for good eye contact.
4. Be sure that the issue or task is one that calls for new options and not just a rehash of old possibilities.

Generating Tools: Brainstorming

5. Avoid unproductive stems. For example, “Can you think of any ideas about...?” (people might simply say yes or no), or “How many can you...?” (people might say, “three” or any number).
6. Challenge the group to “stretch” for 30 - 50 options; the most common and familiar ideas will often come out early in the session.
7. Choose one member of the group to jot down any ideas you may have missed.
8. Monitor the group for active participation. Encourage (but do not force) all group members to contribute.

Steps for Using this Tool

1. State the task or issue in the form of a concise question or statement. Use a stem that invites possibilities (e.g., In what ways might...? How to...? List ways to... Think of many ways to...).
2. Review the key background data, to insure that everyone understands the task, and address any questions the group may have.
3. Remind the group that the goal is to generate many, varied, and original options in a short period of time (often 10-15 minutes), while being sure to follow the four guidelines.
4. Begin Brainstorming. The group members call out options as quickly as they think of them. The facilitator: numbers and records each option; hangs each flip chart paper on the wall as it is completed; uses encouraging prompts, such as: “Let’s keep thinking of more options,” or “Try to think of some possibilities that no one else might think of;” listens for freewheeling ideas and combinations; and, identifies these examples so others can model them.
5. Close the session when the person or group who posed the task, or who has responsibility for action, has ample options, or when you reach the stated time limit.

Examples and Applications

Some ways to use the Brainstorming tool with students might include:

- Listing ways to use specific objects or materials (e.g., in a science experiment or project)
- Naming things that meet certain stated requirements or properties (e.g., List many things that are round and red; List many things that really stick; List many things that might be used to write with)
- Listing many, varied, or unusual ways to present and share your ideas and reactions to a book or video or film
- Listing many issues or questions about a specific topic in any subject area (as possible independent or small group projects)
- List many ways to promote (any desirable practice or behavior; e.g., recycling or conservation of resources)

Learning More About the Brainstorming Tool

The following sources will help you learn more about this tool:

Isaksen, S. G., Dorval, K. B., & Treffinger, D. J. (1998). *Toolbox for creative problem solving: Basic tools and resources*. Williamsville, NY: Creative Problem Solving Group–Buffalo.

Osborn, A. F. (1953). *Applied Imagination*. New York: Charles Scribners' Sons.

Treffinger, D. J. (2000). *Creative problem solver's guidebook*. Waco, TX: Prufrock Press.

Treffinger, D. J. & Nassab, C. A. (1998). *Thinking tools guides*. Sarasota FL: Center for Creative Learning.