

Position Paper: How to Brainstorm



The Creative Shift Guide on How to Brainstormⁱ

The generation of creative ideas is often required. The word “brainstorm” can often strike fear and loathing into the hearts of team members who are invited to participate in this activity. That’s because it’s often not carried out as effectively as it might.

There’s more to brain-storming than meets the eye. Here’s some top tips we have garnered from a variety of sources – taking especial inspiration from “[InGenius – A Crash Course in Creativity](#)” by Tina Seelig, our heroes at the D School at Stanford and David Kelly at IDEO. Of course you might just choose Creative Shift to run your ideas generation sessions so that you can make the most of the investment of your time and energy.

We’d love to do that. Give us a call.

What does the space look like?

There should be plenty of space people should be free to move around. Brainstorming should be done standing up to allow expression and for energy and ideas to flow.

Don’t restrict the space for recording. If you run out of space you will run out of ideas. Use a wall and post its rather than a white board!

Who should participate?

Being invited to a brainstorm is an honour! Your point of view is valuable so share it. Invite people with opposing perspectives - people who will interact with the result in a range of ways.

Do not invite the people whose final decision it will be! Aim for around 6- 8 people (the “Two Pizza Rule”ⁱⁱ)

What is the topic?

The question you ask is the frame with which you view the problem. Consider it carefully. Not too wide - not too specific. Make it provocative or surprising?

What else should be in the room?

It is helpful to fill the room with things that will stimulate the discussion. Have examples of the thing you are brainstorming if possible.

Pens, paper and other fast prototyping materials. Wooden blocks, Lego, Play-dough, plasticine, stickers, pipe cleaners, glue and glitter. People build to think. Three dimensions can be very communicative.

How to start?

Help people to transition into the thinking mode from their regular work with a warm up activity.

Mad libs? Set of letters and creating as many words as possible. A seemingly silly prompt like how would you design glasses if we had no ears.

People may feel awkward at first, but it is important to mark the transition.

Remind people of the rules!

What are the rules?

There are no bad ideas!! No matter how strange an idea your job is to build on it.

Work on all the ideas for a while, explore them – have an exploration phase.

Clear walls must be in place between the two phases. The trap is that people eliminate ideas too early as they feel a need to evaluate ideas as they are generated.

Exploitation phase is where decisions are made and resources committed.

Encourage wild and crazy ideas. There may be a hidden gem. Give yourself a goal a certain number of variations or ideas: 500 hundred flavours, after 300 hundred you will know you have moved beyond the first wave.

Ideas are like seeds, the more you have planted the more likely you will find the one that will grow. Ask people to come up with the worst ideas they can to help them get used to deferring judgement

The process

One conversation at a time.

Along the way challenge with different points of view. Remove obvious solutions.

During the session throw out provocative prompts, how would you do that on the moon or underwater? How would a child do that? Or someone with a disability?

Can you design it with £1 or with millions? What is the most dangerous playground in the world?

The further you get away from your current place, time the more imaginative your ideas.

Build on ideas. Rhythm, idea: build , build, build, jump. Ideas should be written as short statements rather than long descriptions. Headlines.

How are ideas captured?

Everyone has a pen and paper or a sticky, everyone writes.

Post-its are good because you can write in real time. It forces the statement to be short. You can cluster ideas as patterns emerge.

Mind mapping – central topic , branches etc.

How much time?

No more than an hour, energy will drop. Flash 10 – 15 minutes if people know each other well but 45 – 60 minutes is best.

You must have enough time to get past the first wave of ideas. Break up the time into sections using prompts.

End on a high and leave people wanting more.

The room should be saturated with ideas.

What about when you are done?

This can be a challenge. Give everyone a chance to express their favourite, maybe by vote. Categories: best idea, most affordable, fastest etc. This helps decision makers too.

Take photos of all ideas and make notes on the best. Save as much as possible. They should be revisitable as things could change.

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ⁱ And yes, it's ok to say "Brainstorm" – the Epilepsy society says so!
<https://www.epilepsy.org.uk/press/facts/brainstorming-offensive>

ⁱⁱ "The more people there are, the less productive most meetings will be...Amazon's Jeff Bezos has a solution for this problem. He calls it the "two pizza rule": Never have a meeting where two pizzas couldn't feed the entire group. Read: <http://www.businessinsider.com/jeff-bezos-two-pizza-rule-for-productive-meetings-2013-10#ixzz36JIVp300>)