



# BLASTING BARRIERS WITH BRAINSTORMING



Getting  
down to  
business

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## **3M** Meeting Network

Have you ever peered at an empty computer screen waiting for the inspiration that will turn blankness into brilliance? Or felt unable to produce a creative solution to a nagging problem? Any time you face a creative block, consider your best resource for new ideas: your team and your co-workers. Ideas inspire ideas. The brainstorming process, created over 60 years ago by Alex Osborn to increase the quantity and quality of advertising ideas, kindles many more ideas than do individuals working alone.

You don't need to be facing a major decision to call a brainstorming session. Any time you want to tap into a group's creativity, to plan the steps of a team project, to determine possible causes and/or solutions to a problem or to make a non-routine decision, consider a brainstorming session. A few basic guidelines will get you headed in the right direction.

First, gather your group in a setting where distractions can be avoided—a conference room, for example. The group should not be so large that size will inhibit individuals from participating. For best results, limit attendance to 15 or fewer. It's also a good idea to set a time limit of 30 to 45 minutes, depending on the scope of the session.

You should be prepared to explain and enforce the following guidelines:

- Go for quantity of ideas.
- Allow no criticism. In brainstorming, all ideas are valid.
- Look at the problem from many different points of view.
- Encourage people to build on the ideas of others. Combinations often yield new ideas superior to the originals.

Start your session with a clearly stated objective. Phrasing objectives as “why,” “how” and “what” questions gets people involved in finding answers. Write the objective in a prominent place using a whiteboard, an overhead projector or a flipchart.

You may also want to have some props in the room that bring to life the subject in question: the product that needs promoting, or some icons about the subject or the audience. Pictures, toys, magazines, audio or video excite imaginations and conjure up mental pictures of creative solutions.

Once you’ve made the objective clear, give participants four or five minutes to scribble down their thoughts. Supplying participants with large-size Post-it® notes—one note for each idea—makes it easy to record and share those ideas later.

Be prepared to write down all ideas as they occur. You should plan to keep a permanent record so you can use these ideas for future brainstorming. Emerging collaboration technology will make it easier to save those great ideas. A digital whiteboard, for example, will capture brainstorming notes automatically and store this data in your PC, making the ideas easy to print or disseminate.

The next job is to collect ideas from all participants. There are several effective ways to

do this. You can go around the room and ask each person to offer one idea at a time verbally. You can use electronic presentation software to capture suggestions and project them on a screen for everyone to see. You can collect those large-size Post-it notes and stick them on the wall—grouping notes with the same idea together as the first step in organizing solutions. You can have participants turn in their ideas on index cards. If there are controversial issues, or if participants hesitate to offer suggestions that contradict others, you may want to accept ideas anonymously. As ideas run dry, ask participants to dig deeper and build on earlier suggestions.

When suggestions stop flowing, start separating the workable ideas from those that clearly won’t work. You may want to apply criteria such as “the solution must be cost-effective,” and cross out suggestions that don’t fit the bill. As you cross out ideas, continue to combine similar ideas and build on the best features of each. Keep matching suggestions to your original objective.

Now that you’ve narrowed your choices to a few outstanding ideas, pick the best and move forward! Don’t forget to thank the group for their contributions.

And remember, the creative process doesn’t have to end here. The ideas you develop today might well be the basis for another successful brainstorming session in the future.

*Make the meeting.*

## Related Reading

**Conceptual Blockbusting: A Guide to Better Ideas;** 3rd edition; James L. Adams; Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1986.

**101 Creative Problem Solving Techniques: The Handbook of New Ideas for Business;** James M. Higgins; New Management Pubs, 1994.

**How to Get Ideas;** Jack Foster; Berrett - Koed Publishers, 1996.

## Helpful Hints

An unusual perspective can clear creative roadblocks. For example, you might ask: How would your grandmother solve this problem?

When paring down a pile of interesting solutions, set real-world criteria: budget, available staff, time to implement.

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