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Getting the Most Out of Brainstorming

By Toddi Gutner

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The phrase "we need to get together to brainstorm" is uttered countless times in workplaces of all sizes. But how do you make brainstorming productive? How do you take the results of your sessions to the next step?

For many of us, "attending a brainstorming session is likely to conjure up negative thoughts," says Scott Isaksen, president of the Creative Problem Solving Group, an innovation and creativity professional services firm in Buffalo, New York. That's because the phrase has become a generic term to mean just about anything: a gripe session, a debate or a discussion. As a result, says Isaksen, not a lot of idea creation gets done in these meetings.

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That doesn't need to be the case. Done right, brainstorming can unleash a host of creative ideas that may help keep a small company surviving and thriving. But participants need to follow certain guidelines before, during and after the session to get the most out of it.

Successful groups either have an experienced leader who is good at running meetings, or they hire a professional facilitator. Groups like the American Society for Training & Development or the Creative Education Foundation have professionals who charge between \$1,000 and \$1,500 per day.

Isaksen, who consults on such issues for Fortune 100 companies, bases his creative problem-solving practice on the writings of Alex F. Osborn, the man he calls the father of brainstorming. If you're looking to enhance the productivity of your idea-generating sessions, consider the following guidelines.

Before the session. First, you'll need to create the group. The optimal number of people is five to seven. "In a small company, you want to err on the side of inclusiveness," says Isaksen. So if there are 10 people in the company, involve them all in the pre-work and then divide them up into two smaller groups for the actual session. When putting together each group, create a mix of genders, personality styles and expertise.

At least two days before the meeting, explain to the participants their role, as well as key background information about the session and what you're looking to achieve. Include some examples of the types of ideas you want to get out of the meeting. Encourage the participants to take time before the session to think creatively on their own. "Brainstorming isn't about individual ideas versus group ideas," says Isaksen. "It is about getting value from both."

During the session. Perhaps the most important thing is to encourage participants to suspend judgment. The main goal is to generate as many ideas as possible, and in order to do that, participants need to feel that they can suggest anything. Have someone jot down the ideas and post them for all to see. Be positive and receptive to any and all ideas. The session should last no more than 30 to 45 minutes, and the leader should come prepared to submit ideas when the room falls silent.

After the session. Have the group leader collect all the ideas. Encourage participants to bring up any additional suggestions after the session is over. Make sure you thank your participants.

Going forward. Armed with what you hope is a list of good ideas, put them in order of highest priority. Then work with a couple of your top managers to hammer out an action plan with deadline-oriented tasks to be achieved. Keep your brainstorming participants abreast of any actions you take based on their ideas. They'll want to know their time was spent well and productively, which, after all, is what these sessions are all about.

Toddi is an award-winning journalist, writer and editor and currently is a contributing writer covering career management issues for The Wall Street Journal.

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