

Seven steps to better brainstorming

Kevin P. Coyne and Shawn T. Coyne

Most attempts at brainstorming are doomed. To generate better ideas—and boost the odds that your organization will act on them—start by asking better questions.



This article is adapted from Kevin and Shawn Coyne's *Brainsteering: A Better Approach To Breakthrough Ideas* (HarperCollins, March 2011).

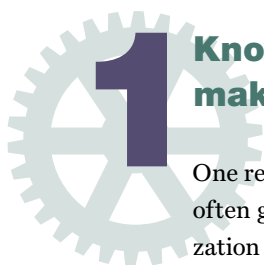
Companies run on good ideas. From R&D groups seeking pipelines of innovative new products to ops teams probing for time-saving process improvements to CEOs searching for that next growth opportunity—all senior managers want to generate better and more creative ideas consistently in the teams they form, participate in, and manage.

Yet all senior managers, at some point, experience the pain of pursuing new ideas by way of traditional brainstorming sessions—still the most common method of using groups to generate ideas at companies around the world. The scene is familiar: a group of people, often chosen largely for political reasons, begins by listening passively as a moderator (often an outsider who knows little about your business) urges you to “Get creative!” and “Think outside the box!” and cheerfully reminds you that “There are no bad ideas!”

The result? Some attendees remain stone-faced throughout the day, others contribute sporadically, and a few loudly dominate the session with their pet ideas. Ideas pop up randomly—some intriguing, many preposterous—but because the session has no structure, little momentum builds around any of them. At session’s end, the group trundles off with a hazy idea of what, if anything, will happen next. “Now we can get back to *real* work,” some whisper.

It doesn't have to be like this. We've led or observed 200 projects over the past decade at more than 150 companies in industries ranging from retailing and education to banking and communications. That experience has helped us develop a practical approach that captures the energy typically wasted in a traditional brainstorming session and steers it in a more productive direction. The trick is to leverage the way people actually think and work in creative problem-solving situations.

We call our approach “brainsteering,” and while it requires more preparation than traditional brainstorming, the results are worthwhile: better ideas in business situations as diverse as inventing new products and services, attracting new customers, designing more efficient business processes, or reducing costs, among others. The next time you assign one of your people to lead an idea generation effort—or decide to lead one yourself—you can significantly improve the odds of success by following the seven steps below.



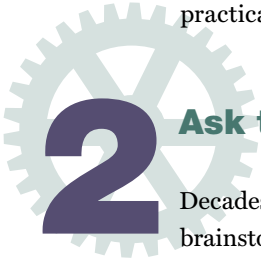
1 Know your organization's decision-making criteria

One reason good ideas hatched in corporate brainstorming sessions often go nowhere is that they are beyond the scope of what the organization would ever be willing to consider. “Think outside the box!” is an unhelpful exhortation if external circumstances or company policies create boxes that the organization truly *must* live within.

Managers hoping to spark creative thinking in their teams should therefore start by understanding (and in some cases shaping) the real criteria the company will use to make decisions about the resulting ideas. Are there any absolute restrictions or limitations, for example? A bank we know wasted a full day's worth of brainstorming because the session's best ideas all required changing IT systems. Yet senior management—unbeknownst to the workshop planners—had recently “locked down” the IT agenda for the next 18 months.

Likewise, what constitutes an acceptable idea? At a different, smarter bank, workshop planners collaborated with senior managers on a highly specific (and therefore highly valuable) definition tailored to meet immediate needs. Good ideas would require no more than \$5,000 per branch in investment and would generate incremental profits quickly.

Further, while three categories of ideas—new products, new sales approaches, and pricing changes—were welcome, senior management would balk at ideas that required new regulatory approvals. The result was a far more productive session delivering exactly what the company wanted: a fistful of ideas, in all three target categories, that were practical, affordable, and profitable within one fiscal year.



Ask the right questions

Decades of academic research shows that traditional, loosely structured brainstorming techniques (“Go for quantity—the greater the number of ideas, the greater the likelihood of winners!”) are inferior to approaches that provide more structure.¹ The best way we’ve found to provide it is to use questions as the platform for idea generation.

In practice, this means building your workshop around a series of “right questions” that your team will explore in small groups during a series of idea generation sessions (more about these later). The trick is to identify questions with two characteristics. First, they should force your participants to take a new and unfamiliar perspective. Why? Because whenever you look for new ways to attack an old problem—whether it’s lowering your company’s operating costs or buying your spouse a birthday gift—you naturally gravitate toward thinking patterns and ideas that worked in the past. Research shows that, over time, you’ll come up with fewer good ideas, despite increased effort. Changing your participants’ perspective will shake up their thinking. (For more on how to do this, see the accompanying article, “Sparkling creativity in teams: An executive’s guide.”) The second characteristic of a right question is that it limits the conceptual space your team will explore, without being so restrictive that it forces particular answers or outcomes.

It’s easier to show such questions in practice than to describe them in theory. A consumer electronics company looking to develop new products might start with questions such as “What’s the biggest avoidable hassle our customers endure?” and “Who uses our product in ways we

¹ For two particularly useful academic studies on the ineffectiveness and inefficiency of traditional brainstorming, see Paul A. Mongeau, *The Brainstorming Myth*, Annual Meeting of the Western States Communication Association, Albuquerque, New Mexico, February 15, 1993; and Frederic M. Jablin and David R. Seibold, “Implications for problem solving groups of empirical research on ‘brainstorming’: A critical review of the literature,” *Southern Speech Communication Journal*, 1978, Volume 43, Number 4, pp. 327–56.

never expected?” By contrast, a health insurance provider looking to cut costs might ask, “What complexity do we plan for daily that, if eliminated, would change the way we operate?” and “In which areas is the efficiency of a given department ‘trapped’ by outdated restrictions placed on it by company policies?”²

In our experience, it’s best to come up with 15 to 20 such questions for a typical workshop attended by about 20 people. Choose the questions carefully, as they will form the heart of your workshop—your participants will be discussing them intensively in small subgroups during a series of sessions.

Choose the right people

The rule here is simple: pick people who can answer the questions you’re asking. As obvious as this sounds, it’s *not* what happens in many traditional brainstorming sessions, where participants are often chosen with less regard for their specific knowledge than for their prominence on the org chart.

Instead, choose participants with firsthand, “in the trenches” knowledge, as a catalog retailer client of ours did for a brainsteering workshop on improving bad-debt collections. (The company had extended credit directly to some customers). During the workshop, when participants were discussing the question “What’s changed in our operating environment since we last redesigned our processes?” a frontline collections manager remarked, “Well, death has become the new bankruptcy.”

A few people laughed knowingly, but the senior managers in the room were perplexed. On further discussion, the story became clear. In years past, some customers who fell behind on their payments would falsely claim bankruptcy when speaking with a collections rep, figuring that the company wouldn’t pursue the matter because of the legal headaches involved. More recently, a better gambit had emerged: unscrupulous borrowers instructed household members to tell the agent they had died—a tactic that halted collections efforts quickly, since reps were uncomfortable pressing the issue.

²For a full discussion about identifying and using a portfolio of such right questions in the generation of personal and institutional ideas, see *Brainsteering*, the book from which this article is adapted, as well as Patricia Gorman Clifford, Kevin P. Coyne, and Renée Dye, “Breakthrough thinking from inside the box,” *Harvard Business Review*, December 2007, Volume 85, Number 12, pp. 70–78.

While this certainly wasn't the largest problem the collectors faced, the line manager's presence in the workshop had uncovered an opportunity. A different line manager in the workshop proposed what became the solution: instructing the reps to sensitively, but firmly, question the recipient of the call for more specific information if the rep suspected a ruse. Dishonest borrowers would invariably hang up if asked to identify themselves or to provide other basic information, and the collections efforts could continue.



Divide and conquer

To ensure fruitful discussions like the one the catalog retailer generated, *don't* have your participants hold one continuous, rambling discussion among the entire group for several hours. Instead, have them conduct multiple, discrete, highly focused idea generation sessions among subgroups of three to five people—no fewer, no more. Each subgroup should focus on a single question for a full 30 minutes. Why three to five people? The social norm in groups of this size is to speak up, whereas the norm in a larger group is to stay quiet.

When you assign people to subgroups, it's important to isolate “idea crushers” in their own subgroup. These people are otherwise suitable for the workshop but, intentionally or not, prevent others from suggesting good ideas. They come in three varieties: bosses, “big mouths,” and subject matter experts.

The boss's presence, which often makes people hesitant to express unproven ideas, is particularly damaging if participants span multiple organizational levels. (“Speak up in front of my boss's boss? No, thanks!”) Big mouths take up air time, intimidate the less confident, and give everyone else an excuse to be lazy. Subject matter experts can squelch new ideas because everyone defers to their presumed superior wisdom, even if they are biased or have incomplete knowledge of the issue at hand.

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By quarantining the idea crushers—and violating the old brainstorming adage that a melting pot of personalities is ideal—you’ll free the other subgroups to think more creatively. Your idea crushers will still be productive; after all, they won’t stop *each other* from speaking up.

Finally, take the 15 to 20 questions you prepared earlier and divide them among the subgroups—about 5 questions each, since it’s unproductive and too time consuming to have all subgroups answer every question. Whenever possible, assign a specific question to the subgroup you consider best equipped to handle it.



On your mark, get set, go!

After your participants arrive, but before the division into subgroups, orient them so that your expectations about what they will—and won’t—accomplish are clear. Remember, your team is accustomed to traditional brainstorming, where the flow of ideas is fast, furious, and ultimately shallow.

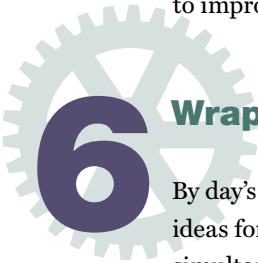
Today, however, each subgroup will thoughtfully consider and discuss a single question for a half hour. No other idea from any source—no matter how good—should be mentioned during a subgroup’s individual session. Tell participants that if anyone thinks of a “silver bullet” solution that’s outside the scope of discussion, they should write it down and share it later.

Prepare your participants for the likelihood that when a subgroup attacks a question, it might generate only two or three worthy ideas. Knowing that probability in advance will prevent participants from becoming discouraged as they build up the creative muscles necessary to think in this new way. The going can feel slow at first, so reassure participants that by the end of the day, after all the subgroups have met several times, there will be no shortage of good ideas.

Also, whenever possible, share “signpost examples” before the start of each session—real questions previous groups used, along with success stories, to motivate participants and show them how a question-based approach can help.

One last warning: no matter how clever your participants, no matter how insightful your questions, the first five minutes of any subgroup’s brainstorming session may feel like typical brainstorming as people test their pet ideas or rattle off superficial new ones. But participants

should persevere. Better thinking soon emerges as the subgroups try to improve shallow ideas while sticking to the assigned questions.



6 Wrap it up

By day's end, a typical subgroup has produced perhaps 15 interesting ideas for further exploration. You've been running multiple subgroups simultaneously, so your 20-person team has collectively generated up to 60 ideas. What now?

One thing *not* to do is have the full group choose the best ideas from the pile, as is common in traditional brainstorming. In our experience, your attendees won't always have an executive-level understanding of the criteria and considerations that must go into prioritizing ideas for actual investment. The experience of picking winners can also be demotivating, particularly if the real decision makers overrule the group's favorite choices later.

Instead, have each subgroup privately narrow its own list of ideas to a top few and then share all the leading ideas with the full group to motivate and inspire participants. But the full group shouldn't pick a winner. Rather, close the workshop on a high note that participants won't expect if they're veterans of traditional brainstorming: describe to them exactly what steps will be taken to choose the winning ideas and how they will learn about the final decisions.



7 Follow up quickly

Decisions and other follow-up activities should be quick and thorough. Of course, we're not suggesting that uninformed or insufficiently researched conclusions should be reached about ideas dreamed up only hours earlier. But the odds that concrete action will result from an idea generation exercise tend to decline quickly as time passes and momentum fades.

The president, provost, and department heads of a US university, for example, announced before a brainsteering workshop that a full staff meeting would be held the morning after it to discuss the various cost-savings ideas it had generated. At the meeting, the senior leaders sorted ideas into four buckets: move immediately to implementation planning, decide today to implement at the closest appropriate time (say, the beginning of the next academic year), assign a group

to research the idea further, or reject right away. This process went smoothly because the team that ran the idea generation workshop had done the work up front to understand the criteria senior leaders would use to judge its work. The university began moving ahead on more than a dozen ideas that would ultimately save millions of dollars.

To close the loop with participants, the university made sure to communicate the results of the decisions quickly to everyone involved, even when an idea was rejected. While it might seem demoralizing to share bad news with a team, we find that doing so actually has the opposite effect. Participants are often desperate for feedback and eager for indications that they have at least been heard. By respectfully explaining why certain ideas were rejected, you can help team members produce better ideas next time. In our experience, they *will* participate next time, often more eagerly than ever.



Traditional brainstorming is fast, furious, and ultimately shallow. By scrapping these traditional techniques for a more focused, question-based approach, senior managers can consistently coax better ideas from their teams. ○

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