Problem Solving | SECTION 5

ORGANIZED BRAINSTORMING

I. Goals/Outcomes

1. To tap the creative potential of a group
2. To prioritize the very best ideas participants produce
3. To fully engage all participants in creating ideas
4. To solve real institutional problems

II. Background/Context

Brainstorming is a creative and engaging way to develop ideas in a group setting. It was created by Alex Osborn in 1938, and has stood the test of time. It is used in thousands of meetings every day, but unfortunately it is often abused. It usually produces a lot of ideas but, too often, you are left with sheets and sheets of ideas with nowhere to go. Just having a bunch of creative ideas isn't enough, you have to be able to do something with them.

In higher education, intellectual inquiry and criticism are highly valued. If you use a creative technique, you often take a great risk. You need to produce real results as quickly as possible. This adaptation of the classic brainstorming technique is effective, efficient, and can produce results, even with a relatively large group.

The most important element of this tool is the generation of ideas without criticism. Synergy often occurs because participants build on each other's ideas, see different connections and perspectives, and are allowed to be creative and different.

There are four rules or guidelines for brainstorming: 1) evaluation and judgment are not allowed; 2) the quantity of ideas is important, in fact, the more the better; 3) wild, far-fetched ideas are encouraged; 4) ideas can be combined, modified, or built upon.
III. Logistics

Materials: Flipcharts, newsprint, a variety of colored magic markers, moveable chairs, color peel & stick dots, and timer
Space needs: Large, comfortable room
Time Frame: Approximately 1 hour
Number of Participants: 6–20

IV. Implementation

We will use 20 participants as a model for this design.

The facilitator announces to the group the topic that the group will be working on during this meeting (e.g., improving campus safety, institutional morale, customer service, freshman involvement in a specific program, inter-departmental communication, etc.). You want to ensure that everyone is on the same page before you begin.

The facilitator should review the four rules or guidelines for brainstorming with everyone. Provide these guidelines on a handout or on a flipchart.

Have the participants count off from one to four. This will give you four, mixed groups of five participants each.

![Diagram of 4 groups of 5 participants]

Have each group appoint a recorder who is responsible for capturing the ideas of the group on a flipchart.

Have the small group brainstorm ideas about the topic for 7 minutes. The recorder in each group should capture all the ideas on the flipchart, unedited. Make sure you let the recorders know that they should also be adding their own ideas.

After 7 minutes, let the participants know that the allotted time is up. Request that all participants remain silent for 1 minute. Explain to them that you want them to percolate for awhile and that they will have another opportunity to generate ideas.

Helpful Hint

We have found that using different colored markers when creating the brainstorming list helps stimulate creativity and thinking.
After participants have been silent for 1 minute, give them an additional 5 minutes to generate more ideas. At this time, each group should have several sheets of flipchart paper with scores of interesting ideas. An example of one group's thinking might look like this:

**Helpful Hint**

The research on creativity indicates that the best ideas are usually generated in the last 25 percent of the time allotted. During a regular brainstorming session, we generate a lot of ideas but they tend to be the usual stuff—mostly ideas that are on the tips of our tongues and the tops of our minds. By providing a second round, participants are often able to stretch their thinking and produce more creative, richer, and out-of-the-box type thinking.

After each group has had their second round, have them use the Las Vegas Voting Technique (see page 2.137 of this book) to come up with the best three to five ideas from their group. Before groups vote, let participants know that they should be voting for those ideas that have the best possibility of being implemented. For example: paying freshmen to come to campus activities might be very creative but how feasible is it? You might adapt a suggestion that has a good chance of being realized (example: instead of paying freshmen, you might waive the fee for certain activities).

Give participants approximately 5 minutes to complete the Las Vegas vote for their group's list.

At this time, using a round-robin approach, have each group report out their best ideas to the larger group. Take one idea from each group, and create a master list, in full view of participants on a flipchart. Make as many rounds as necessary until you have all the ideas from all four groups. If the groups have similar ideas, note this with a checkmark as you create the master list.
Ways to Improve Freshman Experience

1. Ask them
2. Have more activities in the dorms
3. Have an appointed "pal" that checks up with them
4. Waive freshman fees to campus activities
5. Find out what other colleges or universities do with this problem
6. Have more non-alcohol parties
7. Hire local bands for weekend parties
8. Have the president meet regularly with student leaders
9. Have freshman pizza parties
10. Include freshman in the honors lecture series

After the master list has been created, and similar ideas are noted, give all participants three "dots" to use in a Las Vegas vote. Instruct participants to put their three votes or dots on the ideas they believe are the best ones. Have participants come up to the master list and vote. (This should take several minutes.)

At this time, you will have a prioritized list of the very best ideas. Your final list may look like this:

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As you can see, ideas 3, 4, 5, 2 and 1 are the top vote-getters.
At this time, the facilitator has several options:
A. Thank everyone and let them know how their ideas will be utilized (e.g., go to the campus task force on climate, go to president’s council for consideration, go to Human Resources, Department or Student Life, etc.)
B. Create the opportunity to craft beginning action plans for the top five ideas. Have participants work on only the one idea they are interested in and spend 30 minutes creating an implementation plan for their favorite idea.
C. If you do create some beginning action plans, have the work groups report their ideas and use the “Constructive Feedback” tool (see page 2.133 of this book) to solicit reactions and feedback.

Helpful Hint
With Option B, having participants work on selected ideas, make sure you have allotted time for this activity. Participants should be informed ahead of time that they will generate ideas and work on beginning implementation plan. Don’t surprise them.
Schedule

Option A:
1. Facilitator welcomes participants and explains the purpose of the brainstorming meeting and reviews brainstorming rules.  
2. Facilitator uses a counting-off method and creates four groups of five participants. (Be sure to appoint a recorder.)  
3. Small groups brainstorm for 7 minutes.  
4. All participants are silent for 1 minute.  
5. Small groups continue Brainstorming for a second round.  
6. Each group uses the Las Vegas voting technique to determine the best ideas.  
7. Facilitator creates a master list, soliciting ideas from all the small groups.  
8. All participants vote on the very best utilizing the Las Vegas voting technique.  

Total time for Option A: approximately 1 hour

Option B:
1. Organized small groups create beginning action plans for their favorite idea.  
2. Small groups report their implementation plans.  
3. Utilize Constructive Feedback technique to solicit reactions.  

Total time for Option B: approximately 1 hour