

Power Up Your Brainstorming

Traditional brainstorming has been around for decades. But new variations have developed on the old brainstorming theme—try one the next time ideas need to flow. **BY ROSS TARTELL, PH.D.**



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You need new ideas. The pressure is on and the competition is tougher than ever. When the rate of external change exceeds the rate of internal change, it's time to power up your brainstorming to generate creative ideas.

Traditional brainstorming has been around for decades. But new variations have developed on the old brainstorming theme. Here are three examples I have found useful. Try one of these approaches the next time ideas need to flow:

BRAINWAVING: Works well with a quiet or introverted group.

When people like to think for a few minutes, their ideas can get lost in a traditional brainstorming session, or their pace can slow the forward motion of the group. Brainwaving gives them a chance to contribute and keeps the entire group “on the same page.”

Here's how:

1. Discuss the focus question so participants are clear about direction, topic, and context.
2. Write the focus question at the top of a lined page of paper—make one page for each person in the group.
3. Ask each person to write down one idea, then pass the paper to his or her right.

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4. The next person can add a new idea or build on a previous idea on the page.
5. Continue until the brainwaving worksheet returns to its originator.
6. Pass around the completed sheets one last time so everyone can see the final list.
7. If you have 10 people, you suddenly have 100 ideas!
8. Consolidate to reduce redundancy and select the best ideas for follow-up.

AFFINITY DIAGRAM: Categorizes ideas by theme for further action.

The level of interaction and engagement in this technique helps build consensus and commitment. Use this with groups as large as 20 people.

Here's how:

1. Discuss the focus question.
2. Have each individual work privately and write three or four ideas on separate Post-its that are at least 4 x 6 in size.
3. Place all the Post-its so everyone can see all the ideas.
4. Ask participants to group the ideas into logical categories; add additional ideas if necessary.
5. Name each group of ideas.
6. Each grouping becomes an area for action, with each idea providing detail for your focused and actionable themes.

WEBINAR ROUND ROBIN: Brings brainstorming into the Internet era.

Many meetings are now Web based. But how do you brainstorm in a Web-based environment? To use this technique, you'll need meeting software with a “chat” function that will allow you to “cut and paste.”

Here's how:

1. Explain the focus question, clearly identifying the topic and context.
2. Have each person type their idea into “chat” and send it to everyone, so it is visible to all.
3. Read each entry aloud—quickly—and encourage participants to come up with more ideas. To increase participant motivation, you might impose a deadline or set a target number of ideas.

4. After the brainstorming is complete, cut and paste all the ideas into a spreadsheet so the data can be manipulated easily and prepared for action.

An excellent reference on brainstorming is Brian Cole Miller's book, *“Quick Brainstorming Activities for Busy Managers.”*

As the world becomes more complex and the rate of change accelerates, innovation and new ideas are the lifeblood of survival. Use these techniques to power up your brainstorming and charge up the creativity so critical to your future. 