Maximizing Brainstorming Sessions
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Time and time again studies have shown that the best source of ideas and information about a company resides in the company with the people who do the work day in and a day out. Technology is often touted as the solution for doing things faster and more efficiently but there is still no substitution for the human element in brainstorming effective ideas. Locked inside the brains of your employees are the solutions to tomorrow's problems, the keys to successfully defeating the competition and the ways to better handle virtually any situation. There is strength in numbers, which is why the old standby technique of brainstorming is still so powerful.

To make it work, put 8-10 people in a room, give them a flipchart pad and markers, provide a talented facilitator and get out of the way was the ideas start flowing. The following are tips to help make your next brainstorming session successful.

Tip# 1:　　First, provide a quiet, professional location where participants will not be distracted or called out of the room during the session. As part of this, provide refreshments for those in the room since food and hydration are known to stimulate the brain. Additionally, make sure the room is well lit with lighting as close to natural as possible (or the with real thing), have comfortable tables and chairs, and

Tip# 2:　　Make sure that everyone in the room has a clear understanding of what the session goals are. Discuss the reason for the brainstorming session, the issue they are addressing, why it is important, why they were chosen, and what the next steps are after they come up with ideas. Related to this later point, it is crucial that you have management buy-in that they will take action on ideas generated wherever possible. Failure to do so will defeat future brainstorming initiatives while causing potential morale issues with the participants because their expectations were raised and then not met.

Tip# 3:　　Lay the ground rules before beginning. It is best to have participants develop these themselves and put them on a flip chart page which is posted so that when they violate them, you can point to them and humorously say something like – *Did we forget about Rule # ___?* When participants create their own list, they usually feel more ownership than when someone prepares a list for them to follow. In addition to the obvious "turn off all technology while in the room to avoid distractions" the following are typical brainstorming guidelines that might become a ground rule:

- *Check egos and titles at the door* – if you want to be successful, everyone needs to agree that they are all equal in the room so that no one dominates or no one feels intimidated and afraid to offer ideas.

- *Quantity of ideas; not quality is important* – after all, your purpose for being in the room is to generate as many new ideas and strategies as possible. For this reason encourage people to freewheel and offer anything that comes to mind while thinking outside the box. Encourage them before the session starts to not

hinder themselves with "the way we've done it before" or roadblocks that might get in the way.

- *No discussion allowed* – since this will be done later, after all the ideas have been captured and categorized. Discussion of validity will come later; the session is the time to generate many ideas.

- *No criticism is allowed* – if it occurs, people typically either become defensive and confrontational or they shut down and stop offering ideas. Imagine how you would feel if you offered an idea and someone commented, "That won't work because….," "That's the dumbest thing I've ever heard," or "Come on; let's be serious here." Not really comments that encourage additional suggestions are they?

- *All ideas are valid* – since any idea can stimulate a thought or idea in someone else, even if it happens to be off the targeted goals.

- *All ideas get charted* - failure to do so invalidates someone's comments and they will likely stop participating. Related to this, it is important not to truncate or paraphrase someone's ideas while charting. Let them tell you in fewer words what they mean if their idea is complicated so that you do not inject your personal biases or perceptions into what they meant.

- *Everyone participates* – there should be no observers in the group since everyone has valid ideas based on their own knowledge and experience. It is up to the facilitator to ensure that each person is offering ideas and no one person dominates the session. The latter is a sure way to shut down input from more introverted people, especially if the person offering all the comments is a supervisor, manager, or someone with more experience.

- *Only one person talks at a time* – for obvious reasons, this rule keeps things coherent and allows each person to offer ideas.

- *Piggybacking on ideas is encouraged* – if someone offers an idea that prompts an additional thought related to how it could be taken to the next level, that is fine, shout is out!

- *Use and non-offensive and inclusive language* – participants should address the facilitator and not each other to prevent discussion and disagreements. Comments like "You don't know what we have to deal with" can lead to defensiveness and getting off task. Additionally, instead of using gender related terms (he/she) in ideas formulation, make it more generic (e.g. employees or staff members).

Tip#4: Once a set time limit has been reached for the brainstorming part of the session or everyone seems to have run out of ideas, it is often a good idea to categorize

similar items. By grouping things that relate, you can later turn them over to committees or task groups to create action plans for addressing them, if feasible. This might also be done by the same participants who generated the ideas.

Tip#5:   After you have developed groups or categories of items, one fun way to identify what the group believes are the top three (or whatever you decide) items for immediate action is to give each person three colored sticker (the round or square type available in office supply catalogs). Have each of them go up to the lists and place their dots next to whichever item(s) they feel is/are most important. They can put a single dot by three different items, two by one and the third by another item or all three next to one item. After everyone has done this, count the dots to determine priority and possible action items.

The beauty of brainstorming is that all of this can be done in less than an hour and you can generate literally hundreds of ideas from the people who know best – your employees or customers.

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