

BRAINSTORMING

“A journey of a thousand leagues begins with a single step.” – Lao-Tzu

When creating a program, workshop or event, we often do not know what that first step referenced above should be. We try to think of ideas and end up either with too few or even none at all. Often the most difficult part of a task is just getting started.

Brainstorming can be an extremely effective “first step” for nearly any project. It helps generate a creative flow of ideas and also serves as a way of getting all of your group members actively involved in the planning process. Although the brainstorming procedure can be whatever you want it to be, here are a few tips to keep in mind that may help you:

- Write everything down. Don't trust your memory when brainstorming. If all goes well, you will have too many ideas to try to store them in your head! Writing them on a blackboard or poster paper where all members can see them will help spark further ideas.
- There is no wrong answer. Some ideas may seem absolutely ridiculous, but write them down anyway. Sometimes the most absurd ideas turn into the most worthwhile projects. Remember what Dick Rutin has expressed: “What you can do is only limited by what you can dream.”
- Set limits. Start off with a time limit (such as 20 minutes). Also, limit the amount of people involved to a manageable number. If you have a large group (i.e. 20 people), it may be beneficial to break into two separate brainstorming groups. Each group can select its top ideas and present them to the entire group.
- Set ground rules. Verbalize to your group that there should be no criticism of ideas—all ideas should be written on the board—and each member should stay focused on this task for the next 20 minutes (or whatever you choose as your time limit).
- Quantity, not quality. This is probably the opposite of the phrase you are accustomed to

hearing, but in brainstorming you want to get as many ideas as possible. If your group members feel they can express only “quality” ideas, they may be reluctant to say anything at all.

- Show of hands. Once the ideas are down, vote on them to select the group’s top 5 or so. Be sure to allow your members to explain, clarify or expand the ideas if necessary prior to voting. Once you have selected your top ideas, take some time to discuss them (ideas for advertising, themes, and so forth).
- Run with it. After discussing your top choices, select your winner. You may want to let everyone think about the items for a week and vote at your next meeting, but don’t let it sit longer than that. Delays and postponements often result in a loss of enthusiasm.
- Whodunit? Finally, select the committee to put the ideas in motion. They may wish to hold future brainstorming sessions of their own to help formulate details of the event.

Regardless of the nature of the task at hand, brainstorming can be an effective tool to get the most creative and successful ideas rolling. It can be used to overcome mental blocks or to get your group members excited about your project or organization. Plus, the more input you have from others, the more likely your group will be able to support the final decision.

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