



58 tips to

DESIGN & RUN
AN AWESOME
**BRAINSTORMING
SESSION**



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Welcome to my eBook on:

58 TIPS TO DESIGN AND RUN AN AWESOME BRAINSTORMING SESSION.

In the past 15 years I have designed, facilitated and contributed to hundreds of brainstorming sessions.

I know what works and what does not.

Brainstorming can be fun, engaging and produce lots of great ideas.

But it can also be time-consuming and not very productive.

These short, practical tips can help you and your team to avoid these problems and to run an awesome session – every time!

People will want to come back again and again.

Dr Ken Hudson Author,

The Idea Generator (Allen & Unwin, 2007),

The Idea Accelerator (Allen & Unwin, 2008) and

Speed Thinking (Allen & Unwin, 20120).



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TIPS BEFORE THE BRAINSTORMING SESSION

Tip 1.

IT'S TIME TO IMPROVE BRAINSTORMING

Brainstorming was developed by a US advertising executive, Alex F. Osborn in the 1940's.

He defined it as a group activity designed to generate new ideas or solutions to a problem.

It has become the most popular creative thinking tool for groups or teams.

According to Osborn, brainstorming is based on 4 principles:

- No criticism;
- Wild ideas are encouraged;
- Go for quantity; and
- Participants aim to create and build on the ideas of others

BUT THERE IS A PROBLEM

'A large body of research now suggests that for more than seventy years, people using brainstorming may have inadvertently been stifling, not stimulating, their creative juices.'

UK Professor, Richard Wiseman, 59 seconds, Think a little - change a lot, Pan Books, 2009, pg. 116.

Tip 2.

START WITH WHY

The most fundamental question you should ask yourself before scheduling a brainstorming session is 'why'.

Why are you calling the session?

There needs to be a clear, specific problem to be solved or challenge to be met and why it is important to you, the team or business.

If not, it might be better to just bounce some ideas around with a colleague. Or try Blitzing (www.ideasblitz.com).

In your invite you need to say – the reason I am inviting you to this brainstorming session is.....

Tip 3.

CONSIDER BLITZING

There are alternatives to Brainstorming.

One is a tool that I invented called Ideas Blitz (www.ideasblitz.com)

This is where you call a partner or small group together in an informal way and just Blitz a problem.

It's fast, short and energising.

Sometimes it's a better alternative than brainstorming which can be slow to set up and run.

Ideas Blitz is an ideal tool if you need some new ideas in a hurry.

Tip 4.

AGREE ON SOME BRAINSTORMING PRINCIPLES

It's a good idea to ensure that everyone understands and agrees to a number of principles for the session.

- These might include for example:
- Start and end the session on time
- Turn-off mobile phones
- Listen to the other person
- Be open to new perspectives, insights and ideas
- Challenge the idea not the person etc

Tip 5.

DESIGN BACKWARDS FROM THE OBJECTIVE

After you have defined the goals of the brainstorming session it is important to then design the flow.

My suggestion is that you work backwards from the end goal.

In other- words, begin with the end in mind (from Stephen Covey).

For example, if the goal was to develop 3-5 new product concepts work back from this.

Ask yourself – how might you achieve this outcome given the people and time available?

Then show people your design of the session before it starts.

Tip 6.

WHO WILL YOU INVITE?

The problem is this.

If you invite the same people, they will look at the problem in the same way. This equates to the same ideas or results.

You need to invite people that are close to the problem and those that are outside of it.

From this dynamic tension – creative magic can emerge.

As a rule of thumb keep the numbers small – *I have found the ideal number of people is from 6 to 12.*

Tip 7.

SHORTER, FASTER SESSIONS ARE BETTER

Creativity is like a muscle.

The more you exercise it the better.

It is better to run more brainstorming sessions that are shorter and faster. Make them no more than an hour.

Because people are time-poor you will attract more people to the session and they can focus their energy in short, sharp bursts.

This will mean a better quality output and people will be more likely to attend another one.

Tip 8.

IS THE CUSTOMER OR USER REPRESENTED?

In an ideal brainstorming session there should be at least a few people that are customers, users or clients.

These external people will give you more of a grounded perspective on your ideas.

Great ideas often emerge from the interactions between the internal expert and the external voice of the consumer.

Tip 9.

SEND OUT THE CHALLENGE AT LEAST 24 HOURS BEFORE THE SESSION

This has two big benefits.

1. People can start thinking about the challenge beforehand.
2. If they do not understand the challenge or want more information they can do so before the session.

There is nothing worse than starting a brainstorming session with any confusion as to what the session is about or people being unsure of the challenge.

Also remind people of the logistics of the session e.g. date, time, place etc

Tip 10.

MAKE THE CHALLENGE A TIGHT ONE

Brainstorming is about generating a range of new and potentially valuable ideas or solutions.

But there is a paradox.

It is not just about generating lots of unrelated ideas.

It is a more effective practice to give participants a tight challenge.

For example, 'we are looking for new ideas aimed at the teenage market that we can test within 6 months that cost less than \$20,000.'

This tight focus will paradoxically lead to a greater array of relevant and valuable ideas.

Tip 11.

ASK EVERYONE TO BRING ALONG 3 IDEAS

This is a very powerful way to start any session.

If you have 10 people then you can start the session with 30 ideas!

This creates momentum, progress and energy.

The other big advantage is that you have 10 people thinking about the brainstorming session before you start.

This will ensure that everyone can contribute their ideas and reduces the chances of ‘group think.’

Tip 12.

VARY THE LOCATION

There is no rule that says a brainstorming session has to be held in the one place.

Even if it is a purpose-built creative space.

You need to keep brainstorming fresh to generate the best results.

Ideally the location should flow from the challenge or problem at hand.

If you are trying to generate some new kids products have the session at a playground for example.

Tip 13.

MAKE SURE EVERYTHING WORKS

It's simple.

Wherever the session is held make sure that there is enough seating, food or drinks and the technology is working.

If you are using an external location double-check that clear instructions are given to all attendees.

There is nothing worse than starting a session where you need to show a website and there is no internet for example.

Tip 14.

GO FOR A FIELD VISIT

Another great idea is to go for a group field visit before the session.

If you are running a session on developing new meals for working parents for example then have everyone meet at a popular café before the session.

Ask the everyone what can they learn, borrow or adapt from this visit.

Or visit a business or organization that has solved a problem similar to yours even if the brand is from a different industry

Tip 15.

HOW WILL YOU EVALUATE THE IDEAS?

Many sessions end without any ideas being evaluated.

Or worse there has been no thought given to how the ideas are to be evaluated.

These are 2 big mistakes.

It is much better to establish up-front how the ideas are to be evaluated and make this explicit to all attendees.

For example, we will be evaluating ideas on the basis of cost and potential revenue impact. This avoids any confusion or disagreement later in the session.

Tip 16.

MAKE THE SESSION VOLUNTARY

People are time-poor.

They are constantly making judgments as to where to invest their time.

Your job is to enthuse and energise the invited group so they wish to come to your next brainstorming session.

If you force them they will not be as engaged or productive and the energy in the room will suffer.

Tip 17.

ASK PEOPLE TO BRING ALONG AN EXAMPLE OF A GREAT IDEA FROM AN UNRELATED CATEGORY OR INDUSTRY

Sometimes we get stuck.

We generate ideas that are similar to what we have done before.

A way to escape this is to ask attendees to bring along a great idea or product or web site or app from an unrelated category or industry.

Then ask each person to present for say 30 seconds their suggestion. What can the group learn, borrow or adapt from these examples?

Tip 18.

HAVE THE YOUNGER MANAGERS RUN THE SESSION

Every brainstorming session should be held to solve a problem or issue.

But it is also an opportunity to learn.

This can be to learn by doing and/or learn from others in the group.

It also presents an ideal way to develop younger leaders or managers by asking them to design and run the session.

This will force them to think through the approach and enables the more experienced leaders to participate and not dominate.

Tip 19.

MAKE IT FUN

Many people at work are busy, stressed and tired.

This presents an opportunity for your next brainstorming session to be a welcome injection of fun.

Encourage people to play around with ideas, to laugh and to bounce ideas off one another.

Humor enables creativity to emerge and creates a safe space for people to offer up those wild, left-field ideas.

It's a paradox but whilst the challenge might be a serious, you get your best ideas by having fun.

Tip 20.

WHAT'S IN IT FOR PARTICIPANTS?

If you are calling a brainstorming session you are saying that you need help to solve a problem or issue.

But also think about what's in it for the participants?

As yourself, why should they attend your next brainstorming session?

It could be to work on an interesting problem or meet some new people or to be seen or heard by the senior leaders.

If you can answer this question you will obtain a better up-take to your brainstorming invites.

Tip 21.

WHAT DOES SUCCESS LOOK LIKE?

If you are calling or running a brainstorming session ask yourself:

What does a successful brainstorming session look like?

Is it the number of ideas? Or an original solution to a problem?
Or that everyone was fully engaged and participated equally?

Whatever the criteria you should think about this upfront and make it explicit to all participants.

You then have a better measure on the success or otherwise of your session and perhaps what might you do differently next time

Tip 22.

USE AN EXTERNAL FACILITATOR

For an important brainstorming, planning or strategy session it is a good idea to use an external facilitator.

Whilst it is more expensive there are a number of advantages:

- They can bring a fresh tool kit and independent perspective
- It enables the senior leaders to be more involved
- An external facilitator can stop the extroverts from dominating and ensure that everyone is heard
- They can bring up difficult political issues and
- The attendees tend to take the session more seriously

Tip 23.

ASK EACH PERSON TO BRING ALONG 3 DIFFERENT TYPES OF IDEAS

For an experienced group ask each participant to bring along 3 different types of ideas to the challenge at hand. This will ensure a greater diversity of ideas and improves the chances of developing a more original and effective solution.

The 3 types of ideas are:

A usual idea – one that is consistent with what has been done in the past;

A different idea – one that is similar to a idea that has worked in the past; and

A radical idea – as the name suggests an idea that is a complete departure from what has been done before.

Tip 24.

INVITE PEOPLE THAT ARE NEW TO THE ORGANISATION

It's always a good idea to invite some people to the session that are new to the organisation regardless of their role.

These new staff will see the world differently from the people that have been with the company for years.

This also will decrease the potential of 'group think'.

And it provides a novel way to develop these new people and give them exposure to a range of different people throughout the organisation.

Tip 25.

ASK PEOPLE TO BRING ALONG AT LEAST ONE EVOCATIVE IMAGE

The path to the imagination is through the emotions.

Hence if you want the group to be more creative ask everyone to bring along at least one evocative image or video or piece of music.

This can stir and inspire the emotions and allow the individual and collective imagination to soar.

Tip 26.

ENCOURAGE INTUITION

In the world of business there is often a reluctance to acknowledge the role of our intuition.

But a brainstorming session is the perfect time for the participants to use this amazing gift.

Encourage people to judge the appeal of an idea simply through their intuition.

For example: ‘my gut-feel is that our customers will love this new approach’.

After the session you can then validate these feelings.

Tip 27.

INVITE A GRAPHIC ARTIST

This is a left-field idea but I have used it with powerful results.

Ask a graphic artist to come along to the session.

This person can quickly draw the best ideas generated by the group.

This in itself creates further enhancements and interactions which makes the idea even stronger.

A picture in this case is really worth a thousand words.



TIPS DURING THE SESSION

Tip 28.

REMIND PEOPLE WHY PEOPLE ARE THERE

Every brainstorming session should start with a reminder of why everyone is there.

The emphasis should be on what problem or issue has to be solved.

Generating lots of ideas is the pathway to solving a problem in a new and different way but it is not the goal of the session.

Also outline the flow of the session (i.e. the structure) and ask if there are any questions before starting.

Tip 29.

ENCOURAGE BIG THINKING

A great way to start any brainstorming session is to encourage participants to think big and to challenge the status quo.

Perhaps show some quick examples via video of a product or service that has broken through the usual conventions or market-place assumptions.

Ask people to take risks with their thinking and offer up even the most left-field ideas.

In a sense you are giving people permission to be creative.

Go for it!

Tip 30.

BRAINSTORMING IS A TEAM SPORT

This approach to problem solving or idea generation is a group activity.

This means that everyone should be focused on solving the collective challenge.

It is not an opportunity for the loudest or the most creative to shine at the expense of others.

It's often the case that one insightful question by one person results in a big, new idea by someone else.

Tip 31.

THE BIGGEST BARRIER – PRODUCTION BLOCKING

The biggest barrier to brainstorming success is a concept known in research called production blocking.

This is where each individual takes it in turn to contribute their ideas.

The problem is two fold.

1. Sometimes you forget your idea if you have to wait your turn.
2. It takes mental energy to hold on to your idea and follow the conversation.

This means that your mind effectively blocks you from coming up with new ideas.

Tip 32.

START WITH THE INDIVIDUAL

It's a paradox but the key to creative group work is to start with the individual because of issues such as production blocking.

This is why it is such a good idea to ask people to bring along say 3 ideas at the start of each session.

By working from the individual up to a small group then the larger one you:

- Encourage greater participation
- Everyone has to think for themselves
- There is a broader range of ideas
- The chances of 'group think' is reduced
- And the most unexpected people may solve the problem rather than the usual suspects.

Tip 33.

CRITICIZING AN IDEA IS OK

“While the instruction, ‘Do not criticize’ is often cited as the important instruction in brainstorming, this appears to be a counterproductive strategy.

Our findings show that debate and criticism do not inhibit ideas but, rather, stimulate them relative to every other condition.”

2003, Charlan Nemeth, Professor of Psychology at the University of California at Berkeley.

Tip 34.

START WITH AN EASY CHALLENGE FIRST

If you are working on a few problems, start with the easiest one first.

In this way you create greater confidence and momentum in the group.

Then you can move on and tackle the more difficult problem.

Tip 35.

DIVIDE THE BIGGER GROUP INTO SMALLER ONES

Rather than have the entire group focused on the one problem try breaking the bigger group into smaller ones.

Have each group address the challenge for say 10 minutes or so.

Then you can have the smaller groups present to one another looking to build or connect on the ideas of each group.

A twist on this is to have each group work on a different problem then have the smaller groups present to one another both their challenge and potential solutions.

Tip 36.

DON'T LET THE GROUP FIXATE ON THE ONE SOLUTION

If you are facilitating a group make sure that the group does not settle on the one solution.

It may be a good one but it is worth exploring other areas of opportunity.

Use questions like:

- How else can we solve this problem?
- What is another completely different way of addressing this problem?
- What is another perspective on this challenge we have not considered?

Tip 37.

GIVE EACH GOOD IDEA A WORKING TITLE OR HEADLINE

When a group is presenting their best ideas it is a useful habit to encourage them to give each concept a working title or headline.

For example, the next idea we call the ‘one big prize idea.’

Giving each idea a headline makes it easier for the person receiving the idea to comment and remember it.

It also means that you may like the broad concept but not the way the idea is expressed.

For example, with the one big prize idea – ‘we cannot send people around the world as you suggest because it is too expensive but we could send them around Asia’.

Tip 38.

PLACE THE EXTROVERTS IN THE ONE GROUP

Sometimes you are faced with the situation where there are a number of very extroverted, loud or strong personalities.

These people can dominate the group and crowd out other voices.

My suggestion is to place the more extroverted types in the one group.

This gives the rest of the bigger group space to create, build and learn from one another.

Tip 39.

GO WHERE THE ENERGY GOES

It is a good idea to have a semi-structured plan (or flow) for each brainstorming session.

But also need to be flexible in its application.

If there is a lot of energy around one particular topic, solution or discussion then allow the group to stay with this.

The greater the energy the greater the chance of the group emerging with a wonderful, new solution.

Tip 40.

MAKE THE GROUP ASSUMPTIONS EXPLICIT

Before you start solving a problem ask people for any assumptions or beliefs they have about the challenge.

For example, 'I have always believed we need to sell this product for under \$10.'

If you can get these out on the table then they can be challenged, stretched or overturned.

If not, then they became self-limiting boundaries which curtail the range of potential solutions.

Tip 41.

ENHANCE BEFORE EVALUATING

Ideas are fragile, small and undeveloped initial thoughts.

They are never born perfect.

As a result, they need to be nourished, enhanced and built upon.

Encourage the group to use 'yes and' rather than 'yes but.'

Or to use expressions like:

- What I find interesting about your idea is.....
- What I find different or surprising about your approach is.....

Tip 42.

LOOK OUT FOR NON-VERBAL EVALUATION

If you are facilitating a session be alert to non-verbal ways that a senior leader for example can influence ideas.

It could be as simple as crossing their arms or a sigh when an idea is discussed.

These sorts of non-verbal signals can be powerful particularly among younger, junior leaders.

Here are some suggestions to address this situation:

- Place the younger participant in their own group
- Point out to the more experienced leader their behaviour and its impact
- Ask the leader to make their reservations explicit so it can be discussed by the group

Tip 43.

GET PEOPLE TO DRAW THEIR IDEAS

A fun way to generate ideas is to ask participants to draw rather than use words to describe their idea.

A picture is often more evocative and imaginative.

What's more other people can interpret a drawing in many different ways which might lead to new solutions.

Or the group can draw a bigger concept on the whiteboard for example.

The secret in using this technique is to not give people very much time to draw their ideas. Remember it is a fun, quick, idea generation activity not a drawing competition.

Tip 44.

EVALUATE AS YOU GO

This tip goes against the mainstream advice on brainstorming.

But I have found that if you leave evaluation till the end the group often runs out of time and does not get to this important stage.

Try and do an initial evaluation into 3 buckets such as:

- Ideas that meet the challenge
- Ideas that are scary, original or from left-field
- And ideas that are not quite right

In this way the group can park the great ideas and work on making the second scary set of ideas into a more acceptable form.

Tip 45.

SOME DIFFERENT WAYS TO EVALUATE IDEAS:

- Give everyone say 100 votes and ask them to vote for the best ideas (do this quickly as an individual exercise first).
- Evaluate the ideas according to potential impact and speed. Now focus on the big ideas that you can test quickly.
- Evaluate the ideas according to passion only. Start with the ideas that the group feels most passionate about.
- Ask the group to identify the most original ideas. Then focus on these and try and make them more practical and simple.
- Imagine yourself as the CEO, what ideas would they go with?

Tip 46.

DON'T TOLERATE NEGATIVE BEHAVIOUR

Brainstorming and creativity more generally is a fragile activity.

It does not take much to kill the energy in a group.

So if someone is being negative take them aside and point out their behaviour and what effect it might have on the rest of the attendees.

If they continue ask them to leave and work on the problem by themselves.

Tip 47.

HAVE A GREAT IDEA? NOW MAKE IT BETTER!

Many brainstorming sessions end with the group saying wow this is a great idea and leave it at that.

But I have found that if you push the concept further you can transform a potentially great idea into a breakthrough one.

Spend a few minutes on each of your best ideas and try and make these 9 times better in 2 minutes (i.e. you can Blitz* them).

* www.ideasblitz.com

Tip 48.

HAVE A GREAT IDEA? NOW TRY AND SELL IT.

Once you have a few good ideas, a valuable next step is to try and road test these against a potentially tougher audience.

Set up two groups. One is the 'selling team' and another is a team that pretends to be the senior leaders of the organisation.

The selling team must try and engage and excite the leadership team on the merits of the idea.

After a few minutes the roles are reversed.

This type of exercise will highlight any weaknesses in the ideas and anticipate likely objections.

Tip 49.

VARY THE PACE OF THE SESSION

Think of your next brainstorming session as you would going for a run.

You warm up, then you might jog and introduce some sprints then go back to a jog and finally have a stretch to end the workout.

A brainstorming session can be thought of in the same way.

Start slowly then build and run a few Blitz mental sprints particularly if the group is stuck (a Blitz is a short, high energy tool where each person tries to generate 9 ideas in 2 minutes).

www.ideasblitz.com.

Tip 50.

CHECK IN WITH THE GROUP REGULARLY

If you are facilitating the group check in with everyone:

For example:

How is everyone feeling?

Are we making progress towards our goal?

Should we have a break?

Do we need to change direction, focus or the pace of the session?

Remember brainstorming is a collective team effort and the more you can feel the pulse of the team the greater the rewards.

Tip 51.

DEVELOP AN ACTION PLAN FOR YOUR BEST IDEA(S).

In your brainstorming plan you should allocate some time to develop an action plan for the best ideas.

My suggestion is to take the best idea and try and develop a 9 point action plan (i.e. from idea to test with a user or customer).

Each step should be concrete, specific and actionable.

You should aim to develop an action plan in 2 minutes by Blitzing it (i.e. www.ideasblitz.com).

If you are having generating an action plan perhaps it is not such a great idea.



TIPS AFTER THE BRAINSTORMING SESSION

Tip 52.

SAY THANK YOU!

Sometime this is overlooked.

People have given up their time to attend your brainstorming session so don't forget to say than you.

Tip 53.

WHAT ARE THE IDEAS THAT MOST EXCITE YOU

Quickly go around the group and ask each member what were the ideas that most excite them.

This ensures that everyone is heard and it reminds people of what great ideas have been generated.

It is also a way of finding out which ideas have created the most energy within the group.

Tip 54.

OUTLINE THE NEXT STEPS

It is important to outline:

- What has to be done next as a result of this session
- Who is responsible for getting it done
- By when
- What support is needed
- When the group might meet again (or a smaller group).

Tip 55.

SEND THE OUTPUT ASAP

One of the key tasks at the end of each brainstorming session is to distribute the output as quickly as you can.

Send the notes to everyone in the group and anyone else you feel might be interested or could help in the future.

This creates a sense of urgency and maintains momentum.

There is nothing worse than the notes arriving 3 weeks after the session. By then the ideas have been forgotten and the initial energy lost.

Tip 56.

RECAP THE JOURNEY

I have found that it is a valuable practice to recap the journey and progress made.

Start with the goal of the session and what has been achieved by the group.

Highlight the energy and activity by various group members and the big ideas generated rather than nominating specific individuals.

Tip 57.

WHAT DID WE LEARN?

Every brainstorming session is an opportunity to learn.

So a powerful way to end each session is to ask each participant what they learned from the session?

It could be about:

- The people
- Process
- Ideas
- The location etc

Tip 58.

WHAT WORKED AND WHAT COULD WE DO DIFFERENTLY ?

Sometimes even the best laid plans for a brainstorming session don't work out.

In these cases it is better to admit the reality and learn from any mistakes.

Ask the group what worked and what could we do differently next time.

You will gain some useful feedback and the participants will value your honesty.

FOR MORE HELP ON BRAINSTORMING, CREATIVITY, INNOVATION OR GROWTH PLEASE CONTACT DR KEN HUDSON:

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ABOUT DR KEN HUDSON

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