

Leading a Brainstorming Session

By Susan Reese

BRAINSTORM SEEMS TO BE ALMOST A CONTRADICTION IN TERMS, since the brain is associated with intelligence and thought, while the word storm conjures up images of total chaos, and yet a brainstorm has come to mean a new and usually very creative idea. Brainstorming was given its name by advertising executive Alex Osborn, who is generally credited with making it a popular technique in the 1940s. Today brainstorming sessions are still utilized by ad agencies, design studios and other businesses that rely on creativity to succeed, but the technique is now being used by other types of businesses, nonprofit organizations and even educational institutions. These organizations have found that a good brainstorming session can sometimes result in the generation of ideas and solutions to a problem, but for groups that are not used to the freewheeling, thinking-outside-the-box atmosphere of an advertising agency, holding a brainstorming session can be a challenge.

Brainstorming should have a purpose and a goal—not just let's all get together to see what we can up with, but a certain project that needs to be addressed or a specific problem that needs a solution; however, the session itself should be open and free form enough to allow for creativity and innovative thinking. That doesn't mean a leader is not required. Without a leader such a session may break down into chaos—all storm and no brain—with nothing getting accomplished. Someone should also be assigned the task of taking notes, because when the creativity really gets flowing, ideas can get lost, and sometimes you may want to revisit an idea, so it helps if someone is keeping track of things through a written record.

As the leader, you will have to decide how many team members you want to participate in your brainstorming session. It may be as few as four or as many as 30, but you will probably want between five and 10 participants. Because you want as wide a range of creativity as possible, consider inviting people from different departments and teachers of different subjects. A family and consumer sciences education teacher may come up with a completely different kind of idea as a computer technology teacher, and a health sciences instructor may come up with another totally different idea, and then together they may come up with something unexpected and altogether new. This is a situation in which the diversity of career and technical education is its strength.

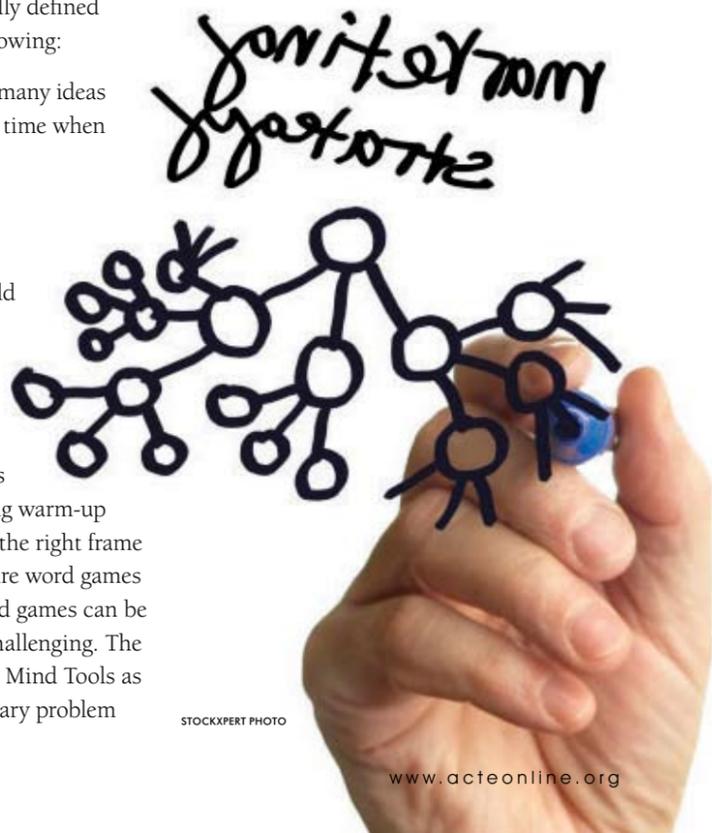
Osborn came up with four main rules to be used in the brainstorming process, and these are usually defined as some variation of the following:

1. Try to come up with as many ideas as possible. This is one time when quantity matters.
2. There should be no criticism of ideas.
3. No idea is too unusual, and unusual ideas should be welcomed.
4. Combine, improve and build upon ideas to form a single good idea.

The company Mind Tools suggests some brainstorming warm-up exercises to get people into the right frame of mind, and among these are word games and a practice run. The word games can be anything stimulating and challenging. The practice run is described by Mind Tools as creating an amusing imaginary problem

and then brainstorming ways to overcome it. This gives participants a feel for the process and warms up the parts of the brain that will be used in the session.

The Maricopa Center for Learning and Instruction (MCLI) of the Maricopa Community Colleges has an online brainstorming guidebook, which adds a few more rules to the original four. Among these are that no discussion should take place during the activity, but should take place after the brainstorming is complete. MCLI also suggests writing all the ideas on a flipchart or board so that the whole group can see them. The person who is leading the session can also perform that task. Like other organizations that have written guides on the subject, MCLI advises setting a time limit for the brainstorming. Around 25 or 30 minutes is often suggested, but if you have a large group, more time may be



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required.

The leader of a brainstorming session serves as a facilitator and keeps things on track, but for educators that is probably not going to be the biggest challenge because keeping control of groups of students is something they have done throughout their professional lives. They should remember, however, not to do what some corporate bosses have been accused of—running the session so tightly that only their own ideas or a limited few ideas get discussed. If an individual is not able to relinquish a little control and recognize that some of the best ideas have sounded a little crazy in the beginning, then perhaps it is best to have someone else lead the session.

Things can get a little wild in brainstorming sessions, since the whole purpose is to think outside of your normal boundaries and to try to come up with as many ideas as possible in a short period of time, so the leader has to recognize when the creativity is flowing and let it go. In some sessions, everyone shouts out ideas, while in others lists are made, and each person in turn reads the ideas listed. The facilitator may have a feel for the group of individuals he or she has recruited for the session and know which of these will work best. You may want to start with the list version, which will provide ideas for others to then begin building upon and helps ensure that everyone gets the chance to participate, and then go to the more freeform format. It is also important to take note when the energy of the session is flagging or the creativity is slowing down. The leader may need to get things flowing again, perhaps by asking a question such as how two of the ideas might work together, or it may be time to end the session if it has gone on for awhile.

Anyone who has participated in brainstorming for an advertising agency or another creative business such as graphic design knows that it can be a really fun experience, and there is often laughter. Some experts say there should be no laughter, but others say it's okay as long as

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it is in the shared spirit of the adventurous process and not in ridicule of others' ideas. The leader of the session will have to be aware of the tone that is taken, or the participants may be afraid to throw out an idea for fear that it will be mocked. During the brainstorming session there are no wrong ideas, and there should be no judgment and no criticism. Instead participants should look for ways to hitchhike on one another's ideas. One idea will spur another, and then together they will build more ideas. Organizational innovation specialist Jeffrey Baumgartner of JPB.com suggests pushing for a minimum of 50 ideas but says 100 would be better.

Once the creative storm has died down, then the more serious work can begin. You may find that some ideas duplicate one another, so they can be combined or some eliminated. Some ideas can be grouped together, and others may require clarification. When you have your list narrowed down, then you can lead your group in discussion and evaluation of the ideas.

As a school leader, you might learn even more than you expected from a brainstorming session, if an article in *BusinessWeek* is correct. According to its author, Robert Sutton, a professor at Stanford's School of Engineering, not only can brainstorming provide good ideas and input from people with diverse skills, but it can also spread knowledge about your organi-

zation. It lets new employees know—and reminds veterans—about the knowledge their fellow employees have to offer, and in that way it can serve as more than just a way to generate good ideas. **I**

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Brainstorming Resources

The sources used for this article can be explored further at these Web sites.

- Brainstorming for Teachers
<http://edweb.sdsu.edu/triton/guides/Brainstorming.html>
- Brainstorming Tutorials
www.brainstorming.co.uk
- "Eight Tips for Better Brainstorming"
BusinessWeek
www.businessweek.com/innovate/content/jul2006/id20060726_517774.htm
- Group Brainstorming MindTools
www.mindtools.com/pages/Supplementary/GroupBrainstorming.htm
- Studio 1151: Brainstorming
Maricopa Center for Learning and Instruction, Maricopa Community Colleges
www.mcli.dist.maricopa.edu/authoring/studio/guidebook/brain.html
- The Step-by-Step Guide to Brainstorming
www.jpb.com/creative/brainstorming.php

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