



BRAINSTORMING FUNDAMENTALS

Great brainstorming is one of the most **powerful** and one of the most **misunderstood** methods in the innovators toolbox. It's a special kind of collaboration with specific rules of behavior designed to maximize idea generation.

Many say they know how to brainstorm. Few do it really well. In some ways, brainstorming is like volleyball. If you know the rules, you might be able to survive a social game at the neighborhood picnic. But this is a far cry from the kind of volleyball you watch on TV. No matter what level you're at, you can always up your game.

We hope to do the following today:

1. (Re)-introduce you to the **rules of brainstorming** so you can start to employ it when appropriate in your group process.
2. Uncover some of the more unspoken rules behind leading a good brainstorm. These we include later in the handout as a **facilitator's crib sheet**.

BRAINSTORMING RULES

Defer judgment – separating idea generation from idea selection strengthens both activities. For now, suspend critique. Know that you'll have plenty of time to evaluate the ideas after the brainstorm.

Encourage wild ideas – breakout ideas are right next to the absurd ones

Build on the ideas of others – listen and add to the flow of ideas. This will springboard your group to places no individual can get to on their own

Go for volume – best way to have a good idea is to have lots of ideas

One conversation at a time – maintain momentum as a group. Save the side conversations for later.

Headline – capture the essence quickly and move on. Don't stall the group by going into a long-winded idea.

BRAINSTORM FACILITATION CRIB SHEET

The insiders guide to running a great brainstorm...

SETUP

- **Recruit the best people**
 - Watch out for groups larger than 8 people.
 - Involve people with different areas of expertise and who you know to be good brainstormers.
- **Set the stage**
 - Bring toys and props - related and unrelated to your brainstorm. Props can give you something to play with and can jog your thinking in unexpected directions.
 - Provide munchies – sugar goes with new ideas
 - Be mindful of seating and layout – not too far apart, facing each other, ability to stand and pace or walk around.
 - Pick a space where there's lots of writing space on the walls - floor to ceiling whiteboards or tons of large post-it pads are ideal.
 - Bring lots of paper and markers – put them on the table and encourage everyone to use them. You get to keep all the ideas on the whiteboards, the post-it pads and on all the paper on the table.
- **Review the rules** and ask group to self enforce them
 - Remind participants to use the paper in front of them. “If you have an idea stuck in your head, get it out on paper so you can move on and participate in the brainstorm at hand.

WARM UP

- **Put people in the right mindset and set tone** with a quick warm up activity.
 - Do something physical (e.g. barnyard animals, jumping jacks, etc.)
 - Run a 2 minute funny brainstorm (e.g. how to sell more pantyhose to men, etc.)

IDEATION

- **Prepare yourself** - know what you want out of the brainstorm. Prepare a draft of initial brainstorm questions that you think will help guide the group. Have a few crazy ideas in your pocket that you can contribute when needed.
 - Be mindful of the scope and specificity of the leading brainstorm questions you use. Too broad (e.g. “How to save the world”) and the group will wander. Too narrow (e.g. “what color should I dye my hair”) and there's no room for unexpected ideas.
- **Write fast & be visual** – practice writing and sketching fast
- **Use humor and be playful**
- **Monitor and lead the productivity of the brainstorm.** Be aware of and affect the following:
 - Framing – scope, specificity and scale of questions posed and how these contribute/drive ideation level
 - Fluency – pace, tone, and overall flow of ideas
 - Flexibility – range and variety of ideas
 - Fundamentals – the basic rules

- **Fun** – group energy level, use of humor, level of participants' engagement, who adds energy and when.

Ways to affect the above and reframe the brainstorm on the fly:

- Pose a more specific question
 - Rephrase a question
 - Follow a thread that seems promising
 - Shift gears and offer a whole new question
 - Lob in a crazy idea
 - Encourage people to move around, pace and play
 - Say something funny
- **Know when to stop**
 - Call the match when you feel you've got what you need or when group runs out of steam
 - In general, think ~45-60 minutes for actual brainstorm time. Warm up and wrap up can take ~15-30 minutes. Actual time spent can vary according to a group's level of brainstorm proficiency and endurance.

WRAP UP

- **Start the selection and synthesis step with the group.** A couple of narrowing tools we have found effective include:
 - **Post-it voting** – give every participant 4 stickers and have everyone put stickers next to their favorite ideas. Clustering of stickers indicate possible strong design directions.
 - **Group review and discussion** – ask everyone to review the boards of ideas, and talk about the specific ideas or directions they like and why.

OFFLINE

- **Continue the selection and synthesis step in a small team (1-2 people) offline.**
 - Capture your big ideas in new sketches, one page write-ups, storyboards, headlines, etc.
 - Your goal is to synthesize your ideas into concepts or concept directions that act as springboards to prototyping.

And finally, how do you know if you've run a successful brainstorm?

- **Fluency:** you leave with a lot of good ideas. A good brainstorm can result in ~100 ideas in an hour.
- **Flexibility :** you have a wide variety of different concept directions hidden in the mess of ideas.
- **Springboards :** you leave with a handful of great springboards that you can start to prototype.
- Your room looks like the photo at the front of this handout!