METHOD	BRAINSTORMING

Area of CoP Activity: Learning and Developing Practice

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CoP Lifecycle Phase:
Inquire
Design

CoP Success Factor:
Community Interaction
Sharing Best Practice
Strategy

EIGE Step:
Step 1: Getting Started
Step 6: What Comes After the GEP

Group Size: 3-6 people per group

Difficulty Level:

Time Needed:

Facilitator Preparation:

Participant Preparation:

Description: Brainstorming sessions can take many different forms, however here we curate three methods. The first two use standardised templates to be filled out by participants answering one or several rounds to given challenges. Facilitators have the option to then lead the grouping of ideas, as a second step (see Mature Your Ideas).

More Information: www.betterevaluation.org/en/evaluation-options/roundrobin
www.conversational-leadership.net

BRAINSTORMING[1]

Short Description

Brainstorming sessions can take many different forms, however here we adopt a method to use standardised templates to be filled out by participants answering one or several rounds to given challenges. Facilitators have the option to then lead the grouping of ideas, as a second step (see Mature Your Ideas).

With these two types of brainstorming activities, you will systematically, simply and effectively transform questions and challenges into ideas. Here, there are examples of two different approaches: the open and the closed brainstorming. In both options, you can benefit from putting together a team with different professional competencies to get as many different ideas as possible.

When to use

You can use this method when you want to not only share knowledge about a subject but also deepen it with specific ideas. Brainstorming facilitates a relaxed environment that inspires everyone to participate. You should encourage even eccentric ideas so that they can be further developed by others, and all participants should be stimulated to contribute as much as possible. This will help you to co-create a comprehensive set of solutions and ideas.

When used during problem solving, brainstorming brings the participants' diverse experiences together. It increases the diversity of explored ideas, so that better solutions to the problems can be found. Brainstorming can help participants to bond, as they are part of a team collaborating in a safe environment.

How to

A: Brief explanation

There are two types of Brainstorm suggested in this toolkit: open and closed. The open method elicits ideas from a group verbally and openly. The closed one allows the more introverted, quieter, or shyer individuals to equally participate, as the brainstorm is done in silence.

B: Detailed step-by-step guide

THE OPEN BRAINSTORM

- Break a large group of people to smaller groups of 3-6 people and present them with a development question for idea generation. The challenge is either **pre-defined** (you already have it) or **to be defined** together with the participants (you do not have it yet and need to brainstorm what the problem/challenge is). The development question should be written on a post-it note and put in the middle of the poster (template provided).

- The group generates ideas on the question for about 5-10 minutes and then places eight ideas in the areas around the challenge. The ideas should be written on post-it notes in a different colour to the development question.

- This brainstorm is adaptable online. Instead of physical sheets and post-it notes, you could create a shared document to which the participants can contribute, or use the template PDF (available on the CoP websites) for screen sharing and collective editing. Alternatively, the facilitator collects all ideas either verbally one-by-one or asks the participants to send them a message via 'chat' to collect contributions. If the issue is controversial, this may encourage honesty and ideas even from the more introvert or shy personalities. Depending on the software you use for online meetings, there might be co-creation options facilitating co-design in real time, such as Adobe Connect, or Zoom.

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[1] Text and templates adapted from www.mind-lab.dk

THE CLOSED BRAINSTORM[2]

This variant of brainstorming is effective for generating and developing ideas whilst building on the consecutive contributions of each person. This brainstorm is not adaptable online, as the template sheets change hands throughout the activity. This type of brainstorming is based on the "round robin" method and has the benefit of eliciting ideas from quieter participants. It provides each person an equal chance to voice their thoughts and suggest their ideas without pressure.

• Write a development question on a post-it note and stick onto each sheet and give each participant post-it notes in a colour different to the central question.
• Place the participants around a table so that they can exchange the template sheets with their neighbour.

ROUND 1:
• Step 1 – Seat your participants together around a table. Break a big group into smaller ones (max. 6 to fit the template). Give each person post-it notes to record their ideas individually.
• Step 2 – Explain the specific problem that you want to collectively resolve. What do you want to achieve today? What is the point of the meeting?
• Step 3 – Distribute the template to everyone in the group(s), so that each person is holding their own template. Get each participant, in silence, to think of one idea as a solution to the development question, and write it down on a post-it note (1 min).
• Step 4 – Next, get each participant to pass their template with the idea to the person next to them (clockwise). Everyone should now be holding a new template with their neighbour's idea.
Step 5 – Get each participant to use their neighbours' idea as inspiration to create another idea and write it down. Then ask each participant to pass the template they hold with the new idea to the person next to them to repeat step 4. As the ideas are added, the amount of time has been increased, because it will be more difficult to continue coming up with new ideas.
• Step 6 – Continue this cycle until the template reaches the person who started it (Person 1).
• Step 7 - Gather all the templates and collate them, remove duplicates and discuss them further in an open session.

ROUND 2 and 3:

You could conduct as many or as few rounds as you wish, rather than three. It depends on how much time is available.

Additional ideas / information

The timings here are optional, and with three rounds in total it will take 36 minutes to conduct this closed brainstorm. If you have a more complex question or issue, it is possible to increase the timings accordingly, for example, 2 min x 2, 4 min x 2, 6 min x 2. If you have less time, and the question is simple, you can also reduce the time available. It all depends on the time you have, and the difficulty level of the problem.

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[2] Adapted from https://www.betterevaluation.org/en/evaluation-options/roundrobin and www.mind-lab.dk.

REVERSE BRAINSTORMING[3] NEW

Short description

This reverse brainstorming technique is an engaging and provocative alternative to the conventional brainstorming session. It is engaging because it encourages the participants to think the unthinkable and imagine a reality that is undesirable, disappointing, and negative. It is provocative because it forces the participants to let their imagination run in a counterintuitive way and think the opposite of what they would normally be asked to imagine. For example, conventional brainstorming would start from asking "How do we achieve our goals?", but here we would start from "How do we ensure we completely fail?". Paradoxically, the task of thinking why and how and why something will fail can be more fun and harness deeper imagination and thinking outside the box, as humans have a natural ability to identify problems more easily than solutions.

When to use

This method is especially helpful to generate new ideas and to build consensus, but through exploring the future or reality that is unwanted first, rather than an idealistic vision. As with the conventional brainstorming varieties, this method also offers opportunities for exchanging knowledge and information between various people so that more knowledge and new perspectives are generated. Use this method to enthuse your participants if you feel the traditional brainstorming did not bring the expected outcomes, or to surprise your participants if you suspect they are disengaged or bored of standard methods that are frequently used in many workshops. It brings out creativity and imagination by harnessing negative energy, such as cynicism, sarcasm, and hostility.

How to FAIL!? Easy!

How to

A: Brief explanation

Start by asking reverse, provocative questions, and then move on to a process of prioritizing the answers and coming up with **antidotes**, i.e., things/actions to do to ensure the imagined failures do not happen.

B: Detailed step-by-step guide

1. Explain the process. Break a large group into smaller groups of 4-5 (breakout rooms online) and present them with a 'reversed' development question for idea generation. The challenge is either **pre-defined** (you already have it) or **to be defined** together with the participants (you do not have it yet and need to brainstorm what the problem/challenge is). The development question should be written on a post-it note and put in the middle of the poster (Mural, etc., template provided). When designing your question, ensure it can challenge thinking and stimulate imagination in the opposite way to what you want to achieve. Some examples:

   ✓ *How do we ensure our project is misunderstood?*
   ✓ *How do we ensure that our gender equality plan fails?*
   ✓ *How do we ensure that we get a lot of resistance?*
   ✓ *How do we ensure that we don't get any resources for our future work?*
   ✓ *What do we do to have this project blocked by top management?*
   ✓ *How do we ensure no one wants to work with us?*
   ✓ *What are the most innovative and creative strategies to disengage our key change agents?*

2. The group generates ideas on the question for about 10 minutes and then places eight ideas in the areas around the challenge. The ideas should be written on post-it notes in a different colour to the development question. Encourage the participants to be as outrageous and destructive as possible. (10 min)

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[3] Adapted from Conversational Leadership: An online book by David Gurteen. Available from https://conversational-leadership.net/reverse-brainstorming-cafe/

3. Ask one person from each group to share their ideas with the other groups (ask for a volunteer, if online); or ask people to wander around the room and look what other groups have written down. (10 min)

4. Ask each group to identify the top three ideas of their post-its. (10 min)

5. Invite each group to share their ideas and allow them to briefly explain each item. (10 min)

6. Ask the participants to now think about the top three items and come up with three antidotes to them. For example, three things that need to be done well to ensure that their project is understood; or that the gender equality plan is a great success.

7. Ask each group to share their items and allow then to give a few more words of explanation behind each. (10 mins)

8. Finally, invite the participants to share their experiences and insights from the session in their group (use breakouts). Then bring them back together to the main online space (if online) and have a large group conversation about the session and what they have learned. (20 mins)

9. This brainstorm is adaptable online. Instead of physical sheets and post-it notes, you could create a shared document to which the participants can contribute or use the template PDF (available on the CoP websites) for screen sharing and collective editing. Alternatively, the facilitator collects all ideas either verbally one-by-one or asks the participants to send them a message via 'chat' to collect contributions. If the issue is controversial, this may encourage honesty and ideas even from the more introvert or shy personalities. Depending on the software you use for online meetings, there might be co-creation options facilitating co-design in real time, such as Adobe Connect, or Zoom.

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10. Timings are a guideline only and at 90 minutes total for about 30 people the time might be tight. Two hours would be a better allocation of time, especially if it is conducted online. This process works best with about 30 people (6 groups x 5).

Templates

The brainstorming templates are most effective printed on A3-sized paper so that standard square post-it notes fit into the grid.

ACT **Template** **THE OPEN BRAINSTORM**

	DEVELOPMENT QUESTION (post-it note)	

[11] Adapted from Liberating Structures: http://www.liberatingstructures.com/30-critical-uncertainties/.

ACT **Template** **THE CLOSED BRAINSTORM**

DEVELOPMENT QUESTION (post-it note)	ROUND 1	ROUND 2	ROUND 3
PERSON 1 (1 min)			
PERSON 2 (1 min)			
PERSON 3 (2 min)			
PERSON 4 (2 min)			
PERSON 5 (3 min)			
PERSON 6 (3 min)			

REFERENCES

Liberating Structures – Innovation durch echte Zusammenarbeit. 2019. Available from: https://www.liberatingstructures.de/.

Mindlab. 2018. "Methods." Available from: http://mind-lab.dk/en/methods.