

## **Ideas: How to be better at creating, sharing, and receiving them**

Brainstorming is a common tool used in idea generation tasks which is handled in team-settings. Though, its effectiveness is debatable as many researches were conducted on this matter and had revealed contradicting results. One research suggested that brainstorming can improve creative performance by 50% comparing to thinking individually given the same amount of time. On the contrary, the other research suggested little to no evidence that brainstorming could enhance productivity as it was observed that individual working alone could create more *original ideas*.

Despite contradicting observations to the effectiveness of brainstorming, the question here is why brainstorming is a commonly adopted practice in almost any organization? There are two main reasons to explain this. First, assembling combination of expertise in a team to solve a problem can, in theory, result in a better solution being proposed. Second, brainstorming proves to be a democratic option than the letting people come up with their own ideas as it enhances buy-ins and smoothen out subsequent implementation of the ideas generated. Regardless of its effectiveness, brainstorming will most likely remain a key tool used and we will surely have to be in one more than once in a lifetime. This article is merely to explore how can one be better at creating, sharing, and receiving ideas when participating in a brainstorming session?

Before we dwell into how to create better ideas, we need to understand where do idea actually come from and how can they just pop into our head. Most ideas come from past experiences. We draw heavily on past experiences in order to leverage them. So the more diverse your past experiences have been, the bigger pool of ideas you can draw from.

Apart from past experiences, necessity and the fed-up feeling of being put in certain situations can also be a great idea booster in real life as well. For example, necessity is when you are offered an interim leader position as your team leader called in sick for the day. Under this circumstance, you might find yourself better at coming up with ideas to lead the team through an assignment. On the other hand, being fed up is, for example, you have been seated next to a loud colleague whose voice is a disturbance to your productivity. Under this circumstances, you might have to be creative to regain your productivity without coming across as rude where you might end up putting on a headphone and work instead of telling that colleague to lower the voice.

Lastly, some ideas can also come from seeing someone else's ideas too. This does not mean that you are copying others' ideas but it merely means that seeing those ideas presented in front of you can aid the process of building your ideas on top of those original ideas. This is often done in brainstorming session and proved to be very healthy as everyone get to involve in building the best and most original ideas.

Regardless of where those ideas may come from, we have to admit that creative ideas are rare. In a brainstorming meetings, one should not be expected to come up with the most creative ideas rather we are looking for the best ideas that help solve certain

problems e.g. how should we advertise the new product?, how can we solve high turn-over problem?, how can we reduce cost of the product?. Therefore, instead of seeking the most creative ideas, we propose is a slight twist of thinking process called "*lateral thinking*".

*Lateral thinking* is when you address different questions given the problem you are dealing with while creative thinking is to come up with novel ideas. *Lateral thinking* require you to reframe the question you are presented with. Reframing a problem is simply to approach a problem like a child will do. This is done by keep asking questions. The most powerful question and yet the most effective is to ask "*why?*" This is better illustrated using an example. Say your car will not start in the morning and you cannot get to work. The problem here is clear and simple "*I need to start my car.*" With this problem in mind, you will probably go through different solutions in your head whether they be "*check the gas level, "Check the battery", "read the manual", or "call the service stations"*".

Just imagine here if you reframe your problem by asking "*why?*"

***I need to start my car***

***Why?***

***Because I need to go to work***

***Why?***

***Because there is a meeting I need to get to***

***Why?***

***Because I need to give my coworker the assignments for the week***

After asking all these *why* questions, you finally come to realize that what you need to solve is to conduct the meeting through phone call rather than face-to-face for the time being to assign work to the coworker. Problem solved!

Sitting in a meeting room is no different. Anyone can be bogged down by the detail of a problem. Going through these steps of asking why several times may help generating ideas easier and more productive. Apart from asking "*why?*" you can also ask *who, what, when, and how* as well for instance, "*who is part of the problem?*", "*what is stopping us from pursuing the previous strategy*", "*where else can we sell the product to boost sales*", or "*is there another way to promote the product?*" Running different questions can help you come up with ideas that is relevant to the issues and explore every aspect of the problem in order to seek the best ideas that can solve such problem. In brainstorming meetings, the process of asking question should be done out loud with the team so everyone is on the same page. While the process of coming up with ideas to answer those questions can be done in your head before sharing those ideas with the team.

Let's assume you are in a brainstorming meetings which are aiming to seek ways to solve internal communication problems. The problem is rather clear "How can we know what others in the team are doing?"

Let's put *lateral thinking* into use

***How can we know what others in the team are doing?***

***Why?***

***Because the team leader wants to update the progress weekly***

***What has been the method used?***

***Sending weekly email to remind everyone in the team to update his/her progress back via email***

***How does that work?***

***No one in the team answered email***

This introduces a new problem that is more crucial which might help solve the original problem. Let's go on and apply *lateral thinking* a little more. At this point, the whole team should agree on the new problem that come up to collectively seek more ideas to solve it.

***No one is answering email***

***Why?***

***Because everyone's inbox is flooded with email daily***

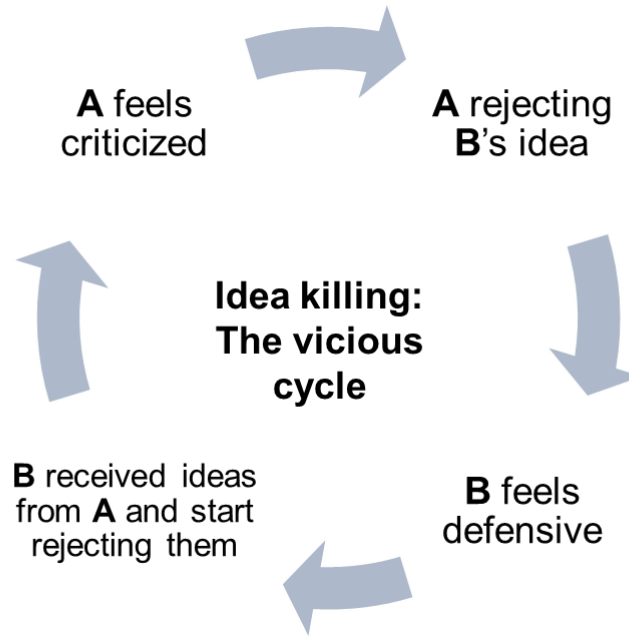
***Can it be other tools?***

***Yes!***

***What can it be?***

***Setting a 10 minutes weekly meeting or set up a group chat through chat engine***

After doing some lateral thinking, we have come up with ideas worth sharing to the team. When it comes to sharing ideas to the team, one major risk is getting your idea killed. This is what we called the vicious circle of idea killing. (*Figure 1*). This happens when those involved in the meeting start attacking each other's ideas making such meeting less productive if not catastrophic. The method to avoid the vicious cycle lies in two areas: the settings of an effective brainstorming meeting and the attendees themselves.



*Figure 1: The vicious cycle of idea killing between A and B*

### **Meeting settings**

The key settings that can avoid idea killing cycle in brainstorming meetings are a target, a deadline, and rules! The meetings can last as long as necessary from 10 minutes to a day or even more but a deadline must be clearly specified. Once a deadline is set, a target or a problem statement has to be clearly specified to those attending the meeting.

After the target and deadline are set, rules of the meetings must follow. Rules must be set such to curb those loud characters over shining the ideas of the quieter ones. This can be done by limiting the number of ideas each individual can contribute, encouraging people to give ideas first before evaluating them (Quantity over quality).

Team leader can assign a moderator to help encourage more ideas and navigate the meetings away from any idea-killing situation that might occur. The moderator, however, should let the discussion free flow to wherever the attendees are taking them and assert less influence on those ideas being generated while avoiding the meeting to enter the vicious cycle by limiting criticisms that may happen prematurely. Lastly, the moderator should take notes and record all ideas. Capturing all ideas give attendees something to refer to later in the meetings when ideas are later to be discussed and evaluated. Also, as I mentioned earlier, ideas that are seen can help attendees build on them and collectively come up with the most effective solutions for the problem.

## Attendees

Attendees in brainstorming meetings are divided into idea givers and idea receivers. Idea givers should avoid inner censors or the rejections of one's ideas because one think their ideas might come across as impractical, unoriginal, boring, dangerous, or ludicrous in others' eyes. Simplest way to avoid other people from judging your ideas is by setting a mood and tone when testing out the idea or selling an idea to everyone else in the meeting by choosing the right wording. If you wish to test an idea, then you might start by warning the listener that your ideas may be half baked but you will need some assurances and are open for criticisms. The idea giver can put forward an idea by start saying something like "*This may sound stupid but I have an idea...*" Another way to persuade others to buy your idea is to let them build on your initial ideas as people tend to be more involved when they are given an ownership and an opportunity to participate. Lastly, the idea giver can think through the consequences of the ideas and seek approaches to tackle possible problems to present with the ideas.

On the other end rests an idea receiver. An idea receiver is expected to play a major part in maintaining a healthy state of the meeting. An idea receiver should refrain from a premature evaluation. This can be done by opting for identifying positive things about the ideas that has just been presented rather than providing the opinion right away. Being positive about the ideas can let the idea giver sense that his/her ideas have merit. After that, when it is time to provide an opinion, the receiver should use suggestive tone such as using "what if..." or by turning criticisms into another problem that is yet to be solved like "So if we go with your idea, how can we convince the boss?"

These techniques are general guidelines that must be put into actions and seek ways that will be suitable for each brainstorming session. Final thoughts are that it is in the human nature to see disadvantages in any idea, and to want to point them out. This negative reaction kills the potential of the initial idea to be valuable or may even limit the person from presenting the ideas in the future altogether. Therefore, everyone has a stake and a responsibility to create the positive environment that can help any idea flourish. This can be done by setting rules in advance along with the positive mindset from all attendees.