

Seven Steps For Brainstorming

From The "Original" Mike Smith

Why:

This is the best process for including everyone in a group decision.

When:

When you are looking for group ideas
When you are capturing the collective intent
When you are looking for group solutions

Set-up:

Large pad of paper or sheets of butcher paper
At least 2 different colors of magic markers
Members seated in a semi-circle facing the facilitator, recorder, and pad

Who:

Facilitator
Recorder
Member

How:

Step one: **Forced List** – (done by each individual)

Instructions:

- a) Everyone has a piece of paper and a writing instrument
- b) State the question to be "stormed"
- c) Offer a brief time limit (30 seconds)
- d) Set an amount goal (10 ideas)
- e) No talking
- f) GO!!!!!!

Step two: **Popcorn** – (done as a group)

Instructions:

- a) Everyone has a list they created in step one
- b) Facilitator explains:
 - a. Everyone has agreed to participate
 - b. There are no judgments or comments made about each entry.
 - c. We are looking for ALL ideas
 - d. There is a time limit (designed to add urgency of participation.) "We only have 5 minutes!"
 - e. There is an entry number goal (designed to add pressure for more ideas). "We need 25 ideas.)
 - f. Participants will raise their hands and be acknowledged by the facilitator.
 - g. Recorders will record in alternating colors on the sheet. (Large groups use more recorders and sheets but all are controlled by the facilitator.
 - h. Restate the question or problem to be "stormed."
- c) Go!!!!
 - a. While the group is throwing ideas at the paper the facilitator must remain in control. Smiling and encouraging the participants and keeping the flow manageable for the recorder(s).

- b. When the flow dries up, the facilitator calls on individuals and encourages more ideas until the goal is met. Reading the list “so far” often triggers more ideas.
- c. When the time is up the facilitator captures any and all ideas that are still flowing. (Never leave an idea out because of the time limit. The time limit was a tool to heighten participation.)

Step three: **Mix and Match** – (group)

Instructions:

- a) Read the entire list.
- b) Ask if anyone wants to add to the list. (Always let people add to the list)
- c) Focus the “brain” power on the list to see which are similar or which can be combined.
- d) You are narrowing the list to ideas that stand alone.

Step four: **Apply Criteria** – (group)

Instructions:

- a) It is now time to state the criteria and restrictions for the final outcome. Stating it any sooner would have limited the participation as each individual would be busy making decisions about their ideas in light of the parameters of the final outcome. Knowing the final criteria ahead of time can limit creativity. Often the idea that does not fit the criteria can be combined or morphed into THE good solution. (What ever we choose can only cost _____ dollars.” Or “We have to be able to do it by such and such a time.”)
- b) The group will begin to align with different ideas.
- c) Mix and match ideas even more.
- d) Line through those things that can not match the restrictions or criteria.

Step 5 - **Narrow the Choices to two** (Group looking for consensus)

Instructions:

- a) Review the entries that have made it to this level. In many cases it is good to rewrite them on clean paper so everyone clearly understands the choices.
- b) Find a spokes person for each entry. If no one is really sold on the entry, it can be removed.
- c) Have each spokes person offer their comments concerning their chosen entry.
- d) Review each entry to see if there is enough energy behind it to keep it in the running. It soon becomes clear which ideas will make it and which will not. This is a great place to look for ways to combined even more.
- e) Gently remove any you can.
- f) If you need too, give everyone the number of votes equal to half of the remaining items. (5 or 6 items – 3 votes; 8 or 9 items – 4 votes)to each person and vote. Keep those two with the most votes. This process will help you bring the entries down to two. **BUT DO NOT VOTE BETWEEN THE FINAL 2!!!!**

Step 6) – **Final Choice** (Group – the decision)

Consensus instructions:

- a) There is a danger here of creating winners and losers. What we are after is winners and winners. Voting a last resort.

- b) Work toward consensus. The facilitator must engage each member with thoughtful consideration and look for options that help people come together on one decision.
- c) Review the solid points of each choice and look for weaknesses in each.
- d) The facilitator must make sure that the discussion remains focused on the “Stormed” ideas and not the personalities of the members. It is helpful to remind everyone that the desired outcome is to benefit of the group working together, not individuals winning or losing.
- e) Notice where the members are aligning themselves. It should become clear which idea would win if a vote were held. The facilitator helps those who are not quite ready to vote “for,” to find a way to smooth over their concerns with phrases like: “How can we improve this (the choice they are against) to make it work for you?” OR (“What if we? Could you live with that?”
- f) Remember, we do not have to have our way but we must have our say!
- g) The final statement, without a vote is, “It appears to me that this (the item) is our choice. Ok?” If there is no opposition, you have consensus. If there is still opposition, you can go to the next step.

Compromise instructions:

- a) Compromise is a loose –loose situation. The object is to feel that each party lost equally.
- b) In that setting, the facilitator works with each party to change the entry to fit a mutually acceptable form. Phrases like, “Are you willing to give up_____ to get _____?”
- c) When you reach mutual acceptability, pronounce the decision. Still no vote!
- d) If compromise will not work – Vote.

Voting instruction:

- a) Since this will be divisive, make it quick and easy.
- b) Secrete vote is usually best because it protects the members from each other but it is usually not an option.
- c) Before the vote, the facilitator reminds the members of their responsibility to each other and that the voting process could be divisive, if they let it.
- d) When the selection is made, the facilitator works to make the vote unanimous as a means of bringing the group together. Phrases like, “Can we now make this choice unanimous so everyone will know we are working this project together.”

Step seven – Follow-up

The facilitator should:

- a) Thank the members for their help in making the process work.
- b) Thank the recorders.
- c) Roll up the big papers from the brainstorming session and label them. The next time you are brainstorming a similar subject, these will be invaluable. Posting them again, will bring the group back to the right mindset.
- d) Check with each of the participants to make sure they felt heard and validated.
- e) Review the process with several of the members to find ways to improve the communication.