Brainstorming—Tried and True or Tired and Blue?

How to run a brainstorming session that works
Hundreds of such brainstorm sessions have been held in our offices and nearly all have been worthwhile in terms of ideas produced.

Alex Osborn (advertising agency executive)

I hate brainstorming. I hate running them, I hate contributing to them and I hate using them to solve problems. They waste huge amounts of time and talent and they are no f***ing good at delivering decent ideas.

Richard Huntington (advertising agency executive)
It’s no surprise that Alex Osborn thought highly of brainstorming— he invented the process. Osborn was executive vice-president of Batten, Barton, Durstine and Osborn (BBDO) and developed brainstorming in 1939 as an alternative to those meetings which include “discouragement and criticism which so often cramp imagination.”

Osborn’s not the only one who thinks highly of the process. When I ask participants at my creative thinking sessions what method their organization uses to generate new ideas, the answer is (more often than not) brainstorming.

Not everyone, however, is a fan of brainstorming. As you can tell from Richard Huntington’s quote above, some people strongly dislike it. People with issues against brainstorming include David Kord Murray (former head of innovation for Intuit Software and author of *Borrowing Brilliance*), Doug Hall (developer of the Eureka! Ranch and a quantifiable method for developing breakthrough ideas) and Dr. Edward de Bono (the father of Lateral Thinking and Six Thinking Hats). For them brainstorming is, at best, a tired and blue technique whose day has come and gone.

I view brainstorming as a tried and true technique. It’s been in use around the world by major corporations, government agencies, not-for-profits and informal gatherings for over 70 years. When it’s done the way Alex Osborn suggested it be done, it works. It produces large quantities of new ideas.
Options

If you’re already a believer in brainstorming and just want to know how to facilitate a successful session, you can turn to pages 16 and skip the front of this ebook.

If you have your doubts about brainstorming and want to read the objections to it (and the rebuttals to those objections) please turn the page and carry-on...
The Case Against Brainstorming

Argument One: Brainstorming Lacks Judgment

Brainstorming, a concept developed by an advertising executive, has given judgment a bad name in the creative world. In a brainstorming session, ideas are “not to be judged.” Evidently, Alex Osborne [sic], the advertising guy who created the concept, felt the critique of an idea would hurt feelings and so hinder the production or volume of ideas that surfaced in one of these sessions. People would be reluctant to contribute an idea for fear of its being rejected or ridiculed. So, he banned judgment from his creative process and by doing so he created a process that produced frivolous and trivial ideas.

from Borrowing Brilliance by David Kord Murray, pages 185-186.

The goal of Borrowing Brilliance, in the words of its author David Kord Murray, “...is to take the creative process out of the shadows of the subconscious mind and bring it into the conscious world.”

Murray maintains that the creative process has six steps which can be divided into two parts. The three steps in part one of the process deal with the origin of a new idea; the three steps in part two of the process deal with the evolution of the idea. In other words, he deliberately divides the creative process into two halves: building first and shaping second.

You can see an illustration of his model on the next page.
Murray’s Creative Process

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<tr>
<td>Step One: <em>Defining</em>. Define the problem you’re trying to solve.</td>
<td>Step Four: <em>Incubating</em>. Allow the combinations to incubate into a solution.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Step Two: <em>Borrowing</em>. Borrow ideas from places with a similar problem.</td>
<td>Step Five: <em>Judging</em>. Identify the strength and weakness of the solution.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Step Three: <em>Combining</em>. Connect and combine these borrowed ideas.</td>
<td>Step Six: <em>Enhancing</em>. Eliminate the weak points while enhancing the strong ones.</td>
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Murray’s model makes sense. Idea generation (part one of the creative process) can be compared to the accelerator on a car while idea assessment (part two of the creative process) can be compared to the brake. It’s hard to get far with your feet on both pedals at the same time.

Here is Murray’s argument against brainstorming: *Judgment is the driving mechanism in the evolution of an idea. Because judgment is an essential part of a sound creative process, the exclusion of judgment in brainstorming means brainstorming is unsound.* To quote Murray: “I’ve never liked the brainstorming process and now I know why—the elimination of judgment produces ideas that are silly, lighthearted, and useless. I’ve come to realize that without skepticism and negative thinking the creative process is doomed to failure.”
Brainstorming was a technique designed to help groups produce ideas, to do idea building. It was never intended to be a complete creative process. Alex Osborn knew that judgment was an important element of the creative process. He strongly felt, however, that “...in creative effort, judgment is good only when properly timed.”

Like David Kord Murray, Osborn divided the creative process into idea origination followed by idea development. Here is Osborn’s actual guideline for banning judgment during a brainstorming session: “Judicial judgment is ruled out. Criticism of ideas will be held until the next day.” (Italics are mine).

Alex Osborn was not against judgment of ideas; he was against the use of judgment at the wrong time. He discovered that judgment, even when done well, is only of value after ideas are produced. That is, after all, the premise of Murray’s own creative process.

Brainstorming is a step in the creative process, not the entire process. Criticizing brainstorming for not doing what it was never intended to do is a fallacious argument.
Brainstorming—Tried and True or Tired and Blue?

**Argument Two: Brainstorming = Braindraining**

The classic approach most humans take when looking for solutions to problems is a procedure I call Braindraining. It works like this: Humans sit in a room. One of them says, “Ready, set, create!” With that, they desperately try to suck solutions from their heads. They squint, grind their teeth, and sweat profusely, all in the hopes of squeezing a few angry pellets of ideas from their straining craniums. In short, they use their minds as mere reference libraries. This SUCK method of creativity will shrivel your brain like a prune in the desert sun. It’s not good for you.

from *Jump Start Your Brain* by Doug Hall, pages 4-5.

Doug Hall never explicitly equates brainstorming to Braindraining in his book *Jump Start Your Brain*. What he does do is describe idea generation sessions like the one above. Here is another example:

*This is the method of idea generation that comes into play 99 and 44/100’s percent of the time on this good earth* In Braindraining, you sit and think about what to do. You suck, stew, drain, fret, and bleed ideas from our [viz.] skulls, hoping something great will ooze out. The brain is the sole source of inspiration.

from *Jump Start Your Brain* by Doug Hall, pages 80-81.
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In a later book, *Jump Start Your Business Brain*, Doug Hall is quite clear that by Braindraining he means brainstorming:

Contrast this [the stimuli approach] with the classic approach to idea generation, where you sit in a room and attempt to suck ideas from your mind. Participants sit in a room and poke, prod and push their brains in search of ideas. This process is often called brainstorming. The effect is more like braindraining. I call it the Suck Method of Creativity.

Braindraining is neither effective nor efficient. With braindraining, the brain is considered the source of all ideas, a sort of idea library ready at all times for any withdrawals its owner may wish to make.

from *Jump Start Your Business Brain* by Doug Hall, page 187.

This is Hall’s argument against brainstorming:

**Part One:** In brainstorming the brain is the sole source of ideas—consequently the ideas already stored in the brains of the participants constitute the total of ideas available.

**Part Two:** Asking participants “to be creative” as the sole means for getting the ideas out of their brains is ineffective and inefficient.

**Part Three:** Familiar groups working on familiar issues produce familiar ideas.

**Part Four:** Because ideas put forward are often criticized by other participants, idea contributors prejudge their ideas until “...only the safest, most restrained, least threatening...” are put forward.
Hall’s solution to Braindraining is Eureka! Stimulus Response:

*With Eureka! Stimulus Response, your brain is used as if it were a stimuli-processing computer, not a reference source. Instead of looking inside your mind for solutions, you react to stimuli to create new associations, new connections, new solutions. Stimuli act like fertilizer for your brain.*

from *Jump Start Your Brain* by Doug Hall, page 83.

The Rebuttals to Argument Two: Poor Implementation ≠ A Poor Technique

**Rebuttal One:** Alex Osborn’s fourth groundrule for brainstorming is “Combination and improvement are sought.” He adds: “In addition to contributing ideas of our own, let’s suggest how another’s idea can be turned into a better idea; or how two or more ideas can be joined into still another idea.” In his books *Your Creative Power* and *Applied Imagination*, Osborn presents several questions and statements to turn any idea into a better idea.

**Rebuttal Two:** The technique of brainstorming consists of more than asking participants to be creative. Brainstorming relies on a strong session leader, a diverse group of participants and adherence to Osborn’s ground rules. When those are in place brainstorming can be highly efficient and effective.

**Rebuttal Three:** Osborn advocated diversity in brainstorming sessions. At his advertising agency he found that “The less experienced sometimes spark better.” So he suggested having “rookies” and “brass” participate in sessions. He also encouraged having at least two of the participants be “self-starters,” individuals who have a knack for idea generation.
Rebuttal Four: Here’s what Osborn had to say about the criticism of ideas during brainstorming—“A few incurable critics will disregard the no criticism rule and will belittle what others suggest. At first, such a transgressor should be gently warned; but if they persist, they should be firmly stopped.”

Doug Hall aptly describes how many brainstorming sessions fail. But Hall wrongly blames the technique. The sessions he describes happen because the brainstorming technique as designed by Alex Osborn is not followed. If a well designed tool is misused and a bad result occurs, the fault is with the user and not with the tool. A well organized and well run brainstorm is quick, productive and enjoyable.
Argument Three: Brainstorming Is Weak

Brainstorming does have a value, but it is a very weak process compared with some of the formal tools of lateral thinking. Just removing inhibitions and suspending judgment is not enough. The traditional process of brainstorming sometimes gives the impression of shooting out a stream of (often crazy) ideas in the hope that one of them might hit a useful target.

There is a need for more deliberate processes to encourage and enhance creativity actively.

from Think! Before It’s Too Late by Edward de Bono, pages 26-27.

Think! Before It’s Too Late was published in 2009. In an earlier book, Serious Creativity, Dr. de Bono spells out his argument more clearly:

The traditional view that creative thinking is only a matter of releasing people from inhibitions and fears is old-fashioned and inadequate. The natural behavior of the brain is to form patterns and to stick to them – that is why the brain is so excellent an arrangement for making sense of the world. So release from fears and inhibitions will only result in a mild increase in creativity. To be effectively creative we have to learn to do some things which are not natural to the brain. For example, we have to learn how to set up provocations and how to use them with the new mental operation of “movement.”

The “crazy” approach to creativity is very superficial and has held back the seriousness with which creative thinking should be treated. This “crazy” approach is based on insufficient
understanding of what needs to happen in creative thinking. Creative thinking is not a scattergun approach in which we shoot out ideas in the hope that one will be useful.”

from Serious Creativity by Edward de Bono, pages 310-311.

Here’s the gist of Dr. de Bono’s argument against brainstorming:

Brainstorming is based on removing inhibitions, suspending judgment and shooting out a stream of (often crazy) ideas in the hope that one of them might hit a useful target. Release from inhibition produces only a mild increase in creativity and creative thinking is not a scattergun approach. Brainstorming is not a deliberate, serious approach to idea generation.

The Rebuttal to Argument Three: Looking At Brainstorming Sideways

Alex Osborn defined brainstorming as “using the brain to storm a creative problem – and do so in commando fashion, with each stormer attacking the same objective.” According to Dictionary.com, commando was a term (used in World War II) applied to specially trained Allied military units used for surprise, hit-and-run raids against Axis forces.” Since Osborn’s first book about brainstorming, Your Creative Power, was published in 1948, I presume his use of “commando” fit the meaning offered by Dictionary.com. The participants at brainstorming sessions were expected to be, like commando units, disciplined and focused on a single, clear target.
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This is the paragraph that follows the definition of brainstorming above:

Judicial thinking must be kept out of such brainstorming. Even discretion is unwanted. As one of our participants remarked: “At any brainstorming table the villain is Prudence.” In this operation all present must shoot wild and pile up every possible alternative by way of ideas.

from Your Creative Power by Alex Osborn, page 165.

The context in which Osborn is using the phrase “shoot wild” is the avoidance of judgment. He is encouraging alternatives that take the group beyond the safe and the obvious, beyond self-censoring, and beyond the normal patterns in which, as de Bono suggests, the brain gets stuck. Osborn is not inviting us to be silly or to put forward ideas at random. The ideas must be focused on the target but they are encouraged to be out-of-the-ordinary (wild) rather than predictable (tame). Osborn is encouraging that we step out of the normal patterns of thought: in effect he is requesting lateral thinking.

Interestingly, de Bono himself (in his earlier writings) agrees that this is what Osborn is attempting with brainstorming:

Another method of encouraging the chance interaction of ideas is the old one of brainstorming. A group of people gathered together to discuss a problem try to lay aside their usual logical inhibitions and say whatever comes into their minds: no thought is too absurd or irrelevant to be uttered. It takes a good deal of practice for a person to be able to offer less than logical thoughts and to refrain from censoring such thoughts when offered by others. The hope is that the mutual stimulation will give rise to many ideas and that chance interactions of these will produce new ideas that none of the participants would otherwise have thought of.

from The Use of Lateral Thinking by Edward de Bono, page 99.
This is a matter of providing a formal opportunity for different minds to interact so that differences in thinking about a subject act as outside influences to change the established patterns in each mind. What is established in one mind may be novel in another. Ideals spark off other ideas.

from *The Mechanism of Mind* by Edward de Bono, page 244.

The paradox is that one of the most useful features of the brainstorming session is its formality.

Once the participants in a brainstorming session know that their task is the generation of ideas, not judgment, they become able to think more laterally.

Brainstorming is a group activity. The advantage of the group is that ideas offered by one person can spark different ideas in another person. Different people have different ways of looking at things.

from *Lateral Thinking for Management* by Edward de Bono, pages 117-118.

De Bono is correct in stating that brainstorming is weak – when compared to a lateral thinking technique such as Provocation&Movement. But that is like saying that a professional athlete like David Beckham or Alex Rodriguez is weak compared to Arnold Schwarzenegger in his prime. De Bono’s statement does not lessen brainstorming’s ability to produce powerful ideas.

Brainstorming is a useful creative thinking technique. When it fails to produce valuable ideas it is more often than not the failure of the session leader to use the technique as prescribed. How to facilitate a brainstorming session is what we’ll deal with next.
How To Run A Brainstorming Session That Works

What is Brainstorming?

Brainstorming is a group creative thinking technique developed in 1939 by Alex Osborn, executive vice-president of the advertising firm Batten, Barton, Durstine and Osborn (BBDO).

To “brainstorm” means “using the brain to storm a creative problem – and do so in commando fashion, with each stormer attacking the same objective.”

Brainstorming is a technique for generating new ideas. Because it is a group thinking technique, it provides a forum for participants to view problems and opportunities from more than a personal perspective. Brainstorming produces a variety of ideas that can be combined and modified to produce even more ideas. When used as designed: it works well.

What Brainstorming is not

Brainstorming is not a technique for evaluating ideas nor is it the only technique available for generating ideas. It is not a complete creative process; it is a step in the creative process.

Brainstorming is a specific technique and is not a generic term or label for creative thinking done by a group.
Participants

According to Osborn, the ideal number of participants at a brainstorming session is between 5 and 10. The ideal participant mix would include “brass” (people in charge of, or responsible for, the topic) and “rookies” (people new to either the topic or the business). He also suggests that at least two members of the session be “self-starters,” people who can generate ideas around the topic the moment it’s announced.

In my experience, five to eight people is an ideal number for a brainstorming session. With less than five participants, energy and momentum are difficult to sustain. With more than eight, hearing and lack of proximity to one another become issues. If you have a large group, say 20 participants, divide them into four sub-groups of five each.

Regarding the participant mix, it helps to have at least one person participate in the session who would not normally be part of the group. For example, if a team of marketers or product developers are planning to brainstorm, they could invite an engineer, an administrator or a supplier to their session. Such a participant would add fresh perspective and insight to the session.

In a recent blog, Mike Brown, author of _Brainzooming_, makes a stronger point for participant diversity: “If you’re lacking diversity on any important dimension relevant to your target audience, voice a concern.” For example, if you’re attempting to develop ideas for new beauty products for women of color, don’t assemble a group of participants that consists solely of male caucasian baby-boomers.
The Session Focus (subject or topic) Statement

The Focus Statement lets participants know why they’re there.

- The focus of a brainstorming session should be specific, not general.
- The focus should be a single focus. Attempting to brainstorm multiple issues at a session should be avoided. One thing at a time.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strong Focus Statement</th>
<th>Weak Focus Statement</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The focus of this session is packaging ideas for our new product.</td>
<td>The focus of this session is ideas for a name, packaging, and launch plan for our new product.</td>
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The Session Goal (outcome) Statement

The Goal Statement lets participants know what constitutes success; it provides a measure. The goal statement can be brief and does not have to be elaborated upon. For example, the session leader could simply tell the participants that the desired outcome of the session is 20 new ideas around the focus. It’s not necessary to say what type of ideas are desired or why they’re needed.
Alternatively, you could tighten the goal statement by stating: “I’m looking for 30 ideas that could be implemented by the first of the year.”

You’ll get better results from your session if you openly state and make visible both the focus and the goal of the session.

You could, for example, begin the session by saying: “We’re here today to generate ideas around the topic of how we can reduce employee turnover in the accounting department. Our goal is 30 ideas that could be implemented by the first of the year.”

Then either post or provide the participants with a printed document that contains both the focus and the goal statements:
Leading a Brainstorming Session

Osborn felt that if a brainstorming session failed, it was due to poor leadership. The following are mistakes that session leaders sometimes make:

- They don’t ensure session participants know and understand the basic ground rules of brainstorming.
- They display a know-it-all attitude that intimidates the participants and shuts down their willingness to contribute to the session.
- They don’t curb criticism.
- They fail to establish a written record of all ideas suggested.

On a more positive note, here are seven leadership actions that promote successful brainstorming:

1. Encourage everyone to participate.
2. If several people are talking at once, the leader can ask them to stop so that someone who has been trying to speak but hasn’t been able to, can have a chance to contribute.
3. Should the session run out of energy or slow down, the leader could provide suggestions that might get the session moving again.
4. Periodically remind participants of the focus and goal of the session.

5. Make sure that either the session notetaker, or each of the participants, capture the ideas put forward.

6. In order to stimulate more ideas, periodically request that the ideas already generated be reviewed or read-aloud.

7. Provide a comfortable and stimulating environment for idea generation.

The Idea Loft in Kansas City, Missouri
The Four Ground Rules of Brainstorming

At the beginning of every brainstorming session, the leader should remind participants of these ground rules:

1. Judicial judgment is ruled out. Criticism of ideas will be withheld until the next day.

2. ‘Wildness’ is welcomed. The crazier the idea, the better; it’s easier to tone down than to think up.

3. Quantity is wanted. The more ideas we pile up, the more likelihood of winners.

4. Combination and improvement are sought. In addition to contributing ideas of our own, let’s suggest how another’s ideas can be turned into a better idea; or how two or more ideas can be joined into still another idea.
The four ground rules listed on the previous page are the ground rules as Alex Osborn stated them in his book *Unlocking Your Creative Power: How to Use Your Imagination to Brighten Life, to Get Ahead*. In that book, he makes it clear that the “rules” are really guidelines and that the leader should state them in his or her own words “because a brainstorm session should always be kept informal.”

Terry Stevens, a friend and a fine creative thinking facilitator, used a nautical theme at several of his brainstorming sessions, sessions he called “Navigations”. Terry named the ground rules of his Navigation Sessions “Navigation Buoys.”

**The Navigation Buoys**

- Assume value.
- Wild ideas cause the splash.
- Quantity creates the current.
- Collaboration charts the course.
Capturing Ideas at a Brainstorming Session

During a brainstorming session, the only strictly formal “rule” is that all ideas suggested should be recorded. When recording ideas, it’s important the notetaker captures each person’s idea in a manner that preserves the uniqueness of that idea. For example, recording the idea “employees should be given a bonus for any of their ideas that lead to increased profitable sales” as “compensation” does an injustice to the original idea.

When I facilitate a brainstorming session, I ask the participants to capture their own ideas on Idea Cards or Post-It™ notes. This avoids the problem mentioned above and ensures that ideas are not missed, something which can easily happen when a session gets fast and furious.

A powerful means of both capturing the output of a brainstorming session while simultaneously stimulating more ideas is to use electronic capture and display. A fine example of this is offered by Zing Technologies. Advantages of this method are speed, anonymity and the capture of each idea.
Is the Term “Brainstorming” Politically Correct?

In early 2005 The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment in Belfast, Northern Ireland, began replacing the term “brainstorming” with the term “thought showers.” They considered brainstorming offensive to people with epilepsy, brain tumors or brain injuries. Other public and private organizations followed suit.

In November of 2005, the creative consultancy Creativity@Work did a survey of mental health charities and found that none of those organizations surveyed considered the term brainstorming to be inappropriate. The National Society For Epilepsy in the U.K. states this on their website: “There has been criticism that the word “brainstorming” is offensive to people with epilepsy. NSE recently conducted a small survey among people with the condition and the overwhelming response was that the term is not offensive when used in its correct context, defining a session amassing spontaneous ideas as potential solutions to a problem.” [http://www.epilepsysociety.org.uk/Press/Backgrounders/Epilepsyterminology](http://www.epilepsysociety.org.uk/Press/Backgrounders/Epilepsyterminology)
About Chuck Dymer
Chuck Dymer has been helping organizations uncork the creative genius of their teams since 1988. He often uses brainstorming as a first step in that process. Although fond of brainstorming (as you can tell) he also uses other tools and techniques to ensure his clients get the ideas they need to deal with change, grow their organizations and save money.

If More Information is Needed
If brainstorming isn’t working for you or if you would like more ideas on how to facilitate a brainstorming session, contact chuck@brillianceactivator.com.

A Word of Thanks
Quotations from Alex Osborn’s book Unlocking Your Creative Power: How to Use Your Imagination to Brighten Life, to Get Ahead are used with permission from The Creative Education Foundation. For more information about the foundation, visit http://www.creativeeducationfoundation.org. Other quotations in this ebook were referenced under the Doctrine of Fair Use.

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