



Bob Roitblat

Purveyor of Fine Ideas & Experience

9 Secrets to Successful Brainstorming*

Brainstorming is a free-form creative thinking activity used by groups to quickly generate a large number of diverse ideas. For the most effective brainstorming session possible, follow these 9 secrets and let the ideas flow.

- 1) **Set a focus and stay on it exclusively.** Brainstorming should be unfiltered not unfocused. Staying focused on your predefined objective and within your constraints helps you to produce better ideas. It also helps reduce anxiety. This process is more accurately known as *constrained brainstorming*.
- 2) **Quantity is the goal.** When it comes to brainstorming, less is not more. The way to get better ideas is to first generate lots of ideas. The greater the number of ideas, the greater the likelihood of discovering useful ideas that produce novel and effective solutions. Here's why: the first third of the ideas generated are usually mediocre and boring. The second third are usually bizarre, off-the-wall, outrageous ideas. It's the last third that are groundbreaking, unexpected and breakthrough, so stick with it.
- 3) **Avoid groupthink.** Have participants start by working silently, on their own and writing down their ideas before sharing them with the group. This raises the quality of ideas generated and helps to avoid groupthink.
- 4) **Collect ideas, don't judge them.** One of the biggest obstacles to creativity is the tendency to find fault with other people's ideas. By trying to simultaneously think creatively to generate ideas and think critically to judge ideas, you limit the number of ideas you'll produce. You also end up sabotaging your chances of success. So it is critical that you suspend judgment during ideation. Avoid censoring yourself or anyone else.
- 5) **Unusual ideas are welcome and encouraged.** Respect all new ideas no matter how bizarre, silly, obvious or ridiculous. All ideas put forward are equally valuable. Encourage wild and crazy ideas; the wilder the idea, the better. Alex Osborn wrote, "it's much easier to tame a wild idea than to invigorate one that has no life in the first place."
- 6) **Combine and build on the ideas of others.** Stay focused on the topic and build on and add to the ideas of others. In addition to contributing ideas of your own, suggest how the ideas of others can be turned into better ideas or how two or more good ideas can be joined to produce a breakthrough idea.
- 7) **Capture all ideas.** Ideas are fleeting. *Ink it when you think it.* Assign a recorder and write everything down; one idea per index card or sticky-note. Avoid creating a list of ideas as this implies a ranking.
- 8) **Be visual.** Nothing gets ideas across faster than a drawing. It's a way to better explore ideas by making them more concrete, more tangible, more shareable. It doesn't matter if you're a terrible sketcher! It's all about the idea behind your sketch.
- 9) **Set a schedule and a goal and stick to them.** Keep the time limited and stick to it while aiming for as many new ideas as possible.
- 10) **** Bonus Secret ** Use a facilitator.** Who sets the ground rules, uses "warm-up" questions, keeps the brainstorming on task, allows contributors to elaborate, encourages participation, and ends the session with conclusions and assignments for next steps.

*Based on the work of Alex Osborn, the advertising genius who "invented" the concept of brainstorming (originally called thinking up) in 1941. Osborn, Alex, *Applied Imagination: Principles and Procedures of Creative Problem Solving*, Scribner, New York, 1963.