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TOASTMASTER®

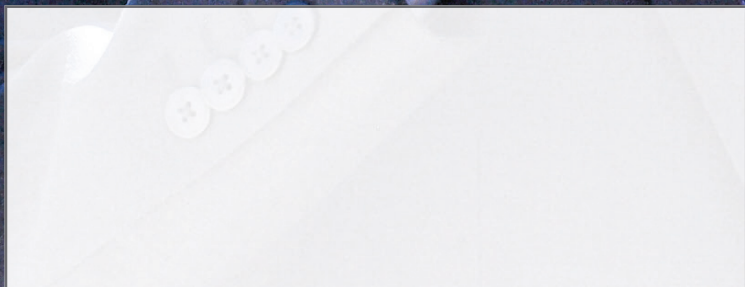
Finish Strong!

How to beat club officer burnout.

Breaking Language Barriers

Jimmy Thai, DTM

Compassionate Leader
Building Bridges
in Vietnam





It's Time for Plan B... Brainstorming!

How to draw out dormant ideas and innovate.

BY CRAIG HARRISON, DTM, PDG

Our workgroup was in the middle of a spirited brainstorming session—a freeform idea-generating meeting where creativity is encouraged, judgment is suspended, and the best ideas often come after 10 or more minutes. The ideas were flying fast and furiously from all participants, as they should when a group gains momentum. The energy was intoxicating. And, in a fit of inspiration, one employee suggested, “Why don’t we reverse the order of the deliverables?”

While nine other people energetically accepted this offer as worthy of inclusion on their flip chart of ideas, their manager scowled and announced, “That will never work!” Thus ended what had been, up until that point, a productive brainstorming session. Sadly, the manager was unclear on the concept at play.

She replaced a brainstorm with a rainstorm and dampened the entire process.

A Different Kind of Collaboration

Brainstorming is a special type of meeting, with its own ground rules, tempo and ethos. Innovation expert John Storm says, “Brainstorming is an art form that can produce valuable results for any organization. Uncovering the ideas buried in the brains of your team is an important ‘front end’ element of any successful innovation process.” It’s also an invaluable tool for Toastmasters clubs, district leaders and others—for idea generation, problem solving, innovation, teambuilding and creativity. Whether you are ideating (generating ideas) on building club membership, generating exciting future meeting themes, amassing marketing

ideas or pondering how to boost attendance at district conferences, brainstorming often leads to a pot of gold at the end of its rainbow of reasoning.

Rules That Rock!

Brainstorming meetings are unbound by traditional meeting rules where predetermined people speak on predetermined subjects for prescribed times. Yet it still has a structure. Sue Walden, founder of ImprovWorks! and contributor to *Yes And ... Your Mental Agility*, makes an important observation: “When I outline the full [brainstorming] process in advance (gather ideas, set criteria, create an implementation strategy), I get less resistance to the brainstorm phase. Groups often need to know that the gathering of ideas is only the first, though most important, step on

this journey.” Like during a jam session of jazz musicians, all you need to do is begin recording and let the sounds commence. Remember, the key is to record the ideas. Later you can go back and edit out that which might not be considered beautiful music.

Storm, the author of *Brainstorming*, relates, “Although there is not one ‘right way’ to brainstorm, it is critical to agree on ground rules, manage expectations, communicate how the ideas will be evaluated and selected, and get clear about the end results.” In brainstorming sessions everyone is equal, all ideas are worthy of consideration, all judgment is suspended and a person’s rank or status is irrelevant. The goal is to fill the air (or whiteboard or flip chart) with ideas, depart from conven-

people in a playful mood: Decorate your meeting space with lava lamps, beanbag chairs and even bubblegum and bubble makers to loosen everyone up. You want to encourage participation by all.

“If you don’t have the budget for playful décor, use what you have in a new way,” suggests Walden. “How about holding the session under the boardroom table, or out under a tree, or in a nearby playground, perhaps with everyone sitting on the merry-go-round? Look around. What seems like a crazy idea?”

The Challenge Question

Language is key in the leading of brainstorming meetings. The focus of your brainstorm should be framed appropri-

Brainstorming sessions rely on the reality that when multiple brainpowers are merged, the results are greater than the sum of their parts.

tional thinking, and allow the smorgasbord of strategies, insights, inspirations and epiphanies to cross-pollinate.

Think of brainstorming meetings as magnificent melting pots, a veritable giant stew where bouillabaisse bubbles and bursts, unleashing new, exciting and innovative initiatives. The Toastmaster, acting as facilitator, becomes the Chef de Aha!

The B-List: Preparing for Your Meeting

The following recommendations will ensure a successful session, whether it’s a stand-alone brainstorm or part of a larger meeting or event:

Adorn your environment with art, toys, games, crayons, colored markers or other stimuli to get the juices flowing and invite fun, free thinking and playfulness. Another way to build anticipation beforehand and garner the attention of participants is to deliver special written invitations in advance to set the tone, expectations and goals for the session.

How you begin your session is key. Create a mental or physical icebreaker to loosen everyone up. Another way to get

ately. “A challenge question is one that defines the challenge, problem or project in a *clear, concise* and *accurate* way, yet opens an invitation for multiple ideas,” according to Bruce Honig and Alain Rostain, authors of *Creative Collaboration: Simple Tools for Inspired Teamwork*.

Once the challenge question is set, the ideas will follow. Whatever contributors’ sentences begin with, the ideas will flow! Each one should be embraced ... accepted with the word “YES!” and followed with “and ...” before another idea is built upon the last idea, or a stand-alone idea is shared.

Setting expectations is also essential. Encourage attendees to check skepticism, negativity and ego at the door. It’s not about whose ideas are embraced. All ideas should be received, for the benefit of the group mission. That’s why we employ the “YES, and ...” approach instead of a “Yes, BUT ...” stance in response to others’ ideas. Remind people to suspend judgment throughout the session. By assigning a scribe or by simply audio-recording the meeting, you can capture it all and later cull the brainstorming session for best ideas. Also, allow

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CHALLENGE QUESTIONS FOR TOASTMASTERS

1. How many ways can we boost club membership?
2. What can we do to re-engage former members?
3. Let’s identify strategies and processes to keep veterans engaged.
4. Let’s generate ideas to enhance our meeting space.
5. How can we positively impact our community through Toastmasters outreach?
6. Let’s explore different meeting formats to infuse new life into our meetings!
7. How many new ideas can we come up with for future speeches?
8. Let’s generate fresh ideas for future meeting themes!
9. What ideas can we come up with for High Performance Leadership projects?
10. What are ideas for fun club special events throughout the year?
11. How can we leverage social media to better promote our club and attract new guests?
12. How many ways can we encourage a youth movement and attract younger guests?
13. How many new venues can we identify to stage Speechcraft and Youth Leadership programs?

HOW TO

It's Time for Plan B ... Brainstorming!

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enough time for people to loosen up. Often the best ideas occur once the group has gotten over any self-consciousness and then gathered momentum. Done properly, everybody contributes and also has fun!

Remember, like mastermind groups, brainstorming sessions rely on the reality that when multiple brainpowers are merged, the results are greater than the sum of their parts. You will generate powerful results from the blend of talent, experience, ideas and perspectives you assemble. When you place everyone on equal footing and free them of the usual restrictions of time, structure and rules, magic occurs.

There's incredible power in questions such as:

"What if we ... ?"

"How about ... ?"

"Let's try ... !"

"Suppose we ... ?"

The answer remains the same: YES, and ... !

You can solve club and meeting problems, generate new ideas for club growth, membership retention, meeting and conference themes and formats and even speech ideas. Forget the norms, it's time to brainstorm! **T**

CRAIG HARRISON, DTM, PDG, founded *www.ExpressionsOfExcellence.com* to provide sales and service solutions through speaking. For more Toastmasters resources visit *www.SpeakAndLeadWithConfidence.com*.

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MORE BRAINSTORMING TECHNIQUES

Role-Storming: Solve problems in the role of someone from a different field. Or channel the masters and solve problems in the role of a famous person. Examples: WWJD...What would (Steve) Jobs Do? What would Leonardo da Vinci, Sun Tzu, Stephen Hawking, Gloria Estefan or Helen Keller do?

The Contrarian Approach: Be a contrarian and apply "opposite" thinking to generate new ideas.

Word Play: Employ semantic intuition. Play with words, antonyms, synonyms, etc. Rhyme, mix and match, use online dictionaries of all sorts. Check out Alexandra Watkins's www.eatmywords.com website for inspiration. (This also makes for a great warm-up activity to prime participants to think creatively.)

Body-Storming: You create a physical environment and then act within it. Because environment informs experience, when you create a different environment, your actions will generate new thoughts, ideas and understandings. Think role-play plus props.

Freewriting: Whether you brainstorm alone or in a group, engage in freewriting where your pen never comes off the page. Whatever you do, KEEP WRITING. No editing allowed. Suspend judgment and write non-stop for a period of 10 or 15 minutes if possible. Fight the urge to spell check, edit or otherwise go back while writing. Keep writing!

Mind Map: Instead of "lined paper" logical and linear thoughts, mind-map ideas are based on a central goal, premise or idea. Use giant tear sheets, colored markers, crayons or just blank paper. It's preferable to use drawings to depict images, ideas and processes. Don't worry about how well you draw. Just map it. (This can also be done with software, but I suggest doing it freehand.)

Location, Location, Location: Conduct your brainstorming session in an unusual, inspiring or supportive environment (Bonus points for a nature setting.). If you must use standard meeting rooms, name them exotically and adorn them with toys, posters, games, inspirational artifacts or thematic items. For example, rename your meeting room Aruba and create an island motif with shells, tropical fruit and accompanying music. Encourage attendees to wear shorts, beach attire, sunhats and tropical colors.

Use a Graphic Recorder or Graphic Facilitator:

Invest in hiring a graphic recorder, also known as a visual practitioner, to record your ideas visually and help bring them to life for all. Find one at www.ifvp.org.

Design Your OWN! You are creative enough to design your own. Go for it!