

IT'S TIME FOR PLAN "B" BRAINSTORMING

Playing the Brain Game for Gain

by Craig Harrison

Our workgroup was in the middle of a spirited brainstorming session — a free form session where creativity is encouraged, judgment is suspended, and the best ideas often come after ten or more minutes. The ideas were flying fast and furious, as they should, when the group gets 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 "That will never work!"

Thus ended a productive brainstorming session. Sadly, the manager was unclear on the concept at play. She replaced a brainstorm with a brain fart and stunk up the entire process.

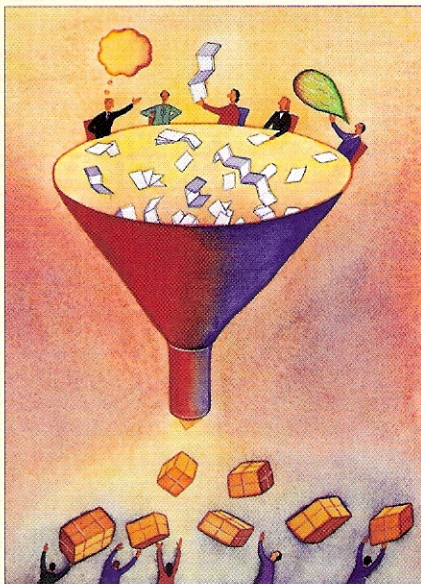
A Different Kind of Collaboration

Brainstorming is a special type of meeting, with its own ground rules, tempo and ethos. It's also an invaluable tool for idea generation, problem solving, innovation, teambuilding and creativity. Whether you are tasked with creating new sales contests, new strategic initiatives or simply trying to break the doldrums of your day-to-day routines, brainstorming carries the day.

Rules That Rock!

By definition, brainstorming is unlike your typical meetings. Its unbounded by traditional rules where pre-determined people speak on pre-determined subjects for prescribed times. Like a jam session of Jazz musicians, all you need to do is begin recording and let the sounds begin. Remember, the key is to record it all. Later you can go back and edit out that which might not be considered beautiful music.

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 with ideas, depart from conventional thinking, and allow the smorgasbord of strategies, ideas, inspirations and epiphanies to cross-pollinate each other. Think of brainstorming meetings as magnificent melting pots, a veritable giant stew bowl where bouillabaisse bubbles and bursts, unleashing new, exciting and innovative initiatives. Consider a skilled facilitator for best results, though this isn't a requirement.

The B-List: Preparing For Your Meeting

The following recommendations will insure 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.
- Consider special written invitations in advance to set the tone, expectations and goals for the session.

- Create a mental and/or physical ice breaker to loosen everyone up.
- Consider lava lamps, beanbag chairs and even bubble-gum and bubble makers to loosen everyone up.
- Encourage participation by all.
- Language is key. Use sentences such as "What if we...?", "How about...", "Let's try...", or "Suppose we..."
- Check your skepticism, negativity and ego at the door. It's not about who's ideas are embraced. All ideas should be received, for the benefit of the group your mission.
- Employ the "Yes, AND..." approach instead of a "Yes, BUT..." stance in response to others' ideas.
- Remind people to suspend judgement throughout the session.
- Assign a scribe or tape record the meeting.
- Allow enough time for people to loosen up. Often the best ideas occur once the group has gotten over any self-consciousness and gathered momentum.
- Have fun!

Remember, like mastermind groups, brainstorming sessions rely on the reality that when multiple brainpower is applied the results are greater than the sum of their parts. You will generate great results from the blend of talent, experience, ideas and perspectives that naturally result from giving everyone equal footing and freeing them of the usual restrictions of time, structure and rules.

By the way, what if...? ■

San Francisco Bay Area-based Professional speaker Craig Harrison founded Expressions of Excellence™ to provide sales and service solutions through speaking. For information on keynotes, training, coaching, curriculum for licensing and more, call (888) 450-0664 or visit www.ExpressionsOfExcellence.com or E-mail excellence@craigsspeaks.com for inquiries.

