On brainstorming

Brainstorming History

The exact beginnings of brainstorming aren't recorded - probably because brainstorming is a creative thought process that comes to certain people naturally.

While the fundamentals of brainstorming have been put to use throughout history, a name wasn't actually put to the process until Alex Osborn, a 1940s advertising executive, decided that the conventional methods of overcoming obstacles and creating new ideas were too inhibitive and weren't conducive to real creativity.

How Brainstorming Came About

At first, Osborn referred to brainstorming as a "think up" process and "think up" had four fundamental rules. These four rules in brainstorming history stated that:

- The goal of a "think up" session would be to come up with as many ideas as possible.
- There would be absolutely no criticism of any thoughts or ideas.
- No idea should be considered too outlandish and such ideas would be encouraged.
- Members of a "think up" team should build upon one another's ideas.

After Osborn introduced the concept of brainstorming to us, it took the world by fire. Nowadays companies across the globe benefit from brainstorming and use brainstorming for marketing concepts, advertising campaigns and management methods and strategies, and for many, many more purposes.

Brainstorming

Generating many radical and useful ideas

Brainstorming is a useful and popular tool that you can use to develop highly creative solutions to a problem.

It is particularly helpful when you need to break out of stale, established patterns of thinking, so that you can develop new ways of looking at things. This can be when you need to develop new opportunities, where you want to improve the service that you offer, or when existing approaches just aren't giving you the results you want.

Used with your team, it helps you bring the experience of all team members into play during problem solving.

This increases the richness of solutions explored (meaning that you can find better solutions to the problems you face, and make better decisions.) It can also help you get buy in from team members for the solution chosen - after all, they have helped create that solution.

Brainstorming and Lateral Thinking

Brainstorming is a lateral thinking process. It asks that people come up with ideas and thoughts that seem at first to be a bit shocking or crazy. You can then change and improve them into ideas that are useful, and often stunningly original.

During brainstorming sessions there should therefore be no criticism of ideas: You are trying to open up possibilities and break down wrong assumptions about the limits of the problem. Judgments and analysis at this stage will stunt idea generation.

Ideas should only be evaluated at the end of the brainstorming session - you can then explore solutions further using conventional approaches.

If your ideas begin to dry up, you can 'seed' the session with, for example, a random word

Individual Brainstorming

When you brainstorm on your own you will tend to produce a wider range of ideas than with group brainstorming - you do not have to worry about other people's egos or opinions, and can therefore be more freely creative. You may not, however, develop ideas as effectively as you do not have the experience of a group to help you.

When Brainstorming on your own, it can be helpful to use Mind Maps to arrange and develop ideas.

Group Brainstorming

Group brainstorming can be very effective as it uses the experience and creativity of all members of the group. When individual members reach their limit on an idea, another member's creativity and experience can take the idea to the next stage. Therefore, group brainstorming tends to develop ideas in more depth than individual brainstorming.

Brainstorming in a group can be risky for individuals. Valuable but strange suggestions may appear stupid at first sight. Because of this, you need to chair sessions tightly so that uncreative people do not crush these ideas and leave group members feeling humiliated.

How to Use the Tool:

To run a group brainstorming session effectively, do the following:

- Define the problem you want solved clearly, and lay out any criteria to be met.
- Keep the session focused on the problem.
- Ensure that no one criticizes or evaluates ideas during the session. Criticism introduces an element of risk for group members when putting forward an

idea. This stifles creativity and cripples the free running nature of a good brainstorming session.

- Encourage an enthusiastic, uncritical attitude among members of the group. Try to get everyone to contribute and develop ideas, including the quietest members of the group.
- Let people have fun brainstorming. Encourage them to come up with as many ideas as possible, from solidly practical ones to wildly impractical ones. Welcome creativity.
- Ensure that no train of thought is followed for too long.
- Encourage people to develop other people's ideas, or to use other ideas to create new ones.
- Appoint one person to note down ideas that come out of the session. A good way of doing this is to use a flip chart. This should be studied and evaluated after the session.

Where possible, participants in the brainstorming process should come from as wide a range of disciplines as possible. This brings a broad range of experience to the session and helps to make it more creative.

And again, it's worth exploring the use of computer-based tools for group brainstorming. As long as you're reasonably quick with keyboard and mouse, these significantly improve the quality and effectiveness of a brainstorming session.

Key Points:

Brainstorming is a great way of generating radical ideas. During the brainstorming process there is no criticism of ideas, as free rein is given to people's creativity (criticism and judgment cramp creativity.)

This often makes group brainstorming sessions enjoyable experiences, which are great for bringing team members together.
Individual brainstorming is best for generating many ideas, but tends to be less effective at developing them. Group brainstorming tends to develop fewer ideas, but takes each idea further. Group brainstorming needs formal rules for it to work smoothly.

Six Thinking Hats

Looking at a Decision from All Points of View

"Six Thinking Hats" is a powerful technique that helps you look at important decisions from a number of different perspectives. It helps you make better decisions by pushing you to move outside your habitual ways of thinking. As such, it helps you understand the full complexity of a decision, and spot issues and opportunities which you might otherwise not notice.

Many successful people think from a very rational, positive viewpoint, and this is

part of the reason that they are successful. Often, though, they may fail to look at problems from emotional, intuitive, creative or negative viewpoints. This can mean that they underestimate resistance to change, don't make creative leaps, and fail to make essential contingency plans.

Similarly, pessimists may be excessively defensive, and people used to a very logical approach to problem solving may fail to engage their creativity or listen to their intuition.

If you look at a problem using the Six Thinking Hats technique, then you'll use all of these approaches to develop your best solution. Your decisions and plans will mix ambition, skill in execution, sensitivity, creativity and good contingency planning.

This tool was created by Edward de Bono in his book "6 Thinking Hats".

How to Use the Tool:

To use Six Thinking Hats to improve the quality of your decision-making, look at the decision "wearing" each of the thinking hats in turn.

Each "Thinking Hat" is a different style of thinking. These are explained below:

- **White Hat:**
  With this thinking hat, you focus on the data available. Look at the information you have, and see what you can learn from it. Look for gaps in your knowledge, and either try to fill them or take account of them.

  This is where you analyze past trends, and try to extrapolate from historical data.

- **Red Hat:**
  Wearing the red hat, you look at the decision using intuition, gut reaction, and emotion. Also try to think how other people will react emotionally, and try to understand the intuitive responses of people who do not fully know your reasoning.

- **Black Hat:**
  When using black hat thinking, look at things pessimistically, cautiously and defensively. Try to see why ideas and approaches might not work. This is important because it highlights the weak points in a plan or course of action. It allows you to eliminate them, alter your approach, or prepare contingency plans to counter problems that arise. Black Hat thinking helps to make your plans tougher and more resilient. It can also help you to spot fatal flaws and risks before you embark on a course of action. Black Hat thinking is one of the real benefits of this technique, as many successful people get so used to thinking positively that often they cannot see problems in advance, leaving them under-prepared for difficulties.

- **Yellow Hat:**
  The yellow hat helps you to think positively. It is the optimistic viewpoint that

helps you to see all the benefits of the decision and the value in it, and spot the opportunities that arise from it. Yellow Hat thinking helps you to keep going when everything looks gloomy and difficult.

- **Green Hat:**
  The Green Hat stands for creativity. This is where you can develop creative solutions to a problem. It is a freewheeling way of thinking, in which there is little criticism of ideas. A whole range of [creativity tools](#) can help you here.

- **Blue Hat:**
  The Blue Hat stands for process control. This is the hat worn by people chairing meetings. When running into difficulties because ideas are running dry, they may direct activity into Green Hat thinking. When contingency plans are needed, they will ask for Black Hat thinking, and so on.

You can use Six Thinking Hats in meetings or on your own. In meetings it has the benefit of defusing the disagreements that can happen when people with different thinking styles discuss the same problem.

A similar approach is to look at problems from the point of view of different professionals (e.g. doctors, architects, sales directors) or different customers.

Example:

The directors of a property company are looking at whether they should construct a new office building. The economy is doing well, and the amount of vacant office space is reducing sharply. As part of their decision they decide to use the 6 Thinking Hats technique during a planning meeting.

Looking at the problem with the **White Hat**, they analyze the data they have. They examine the trend in vacant office space, which shows a sharp reduction. They anticipate that by the time the office block would be completed, that there will be a severe shortage of office space. Current government projections show steady economic growth for at least the construction period.

With **Red Hat** thinking, some of the directors think the proposed building looks quite ugly. While it would be highly cost-effective, they worry that people would not like to work in it.

When they think with the **Black Hat**, they worry that government projections may be wrong. The economy may be about to enter a 'cyclical downturn', in which case the office building may be empty for a long time.

If the building is not attractive, then companies will choose to work in another better-looking building at the same rent.

With the **Yellow Hat**, however, if the economy holds up and their projections are correct, the company stands to make a great deal of money.

If they are lucky, maybe they could sell the building before the next downturn, or rent to tenants on long-term leases that will last through any recession.

With **Green Hat** thinking they consider whether they should change the design to make the building more pleasant. Perhaps they could build prestige offices that people would want to rent in any economic climate. Alternatively, maybe they should invest the money in the short term to buy up property at a low cost when a recession comes.

The **Blue Hat** has been used by the meeting's Chair to move between the different thinking styles. He or she may have needed to keep other members of the team from switching styles, or from criticizing other peoples' points.

Key points:

Six Thinking Hats is a good technique for looking at the effects of a decision from a number of different points of view.

It allows necessary emotion and skepticism to be brought into what would otherwise be purely rational decisions. It opens up the opportunity for creativity within Decision Making. It also helps, for example, persistently pessimistic people to be positive and creative.

Plans developed using the '6 Thinking Hats' technique are sounder and more resilient than would otherwise be the case. This technique may also help you to avoid public relations mistakes, and spot good reasons not to follow a course of action, before you have committed to it.