

Eight Ways to Generate More Ideas in Groups

We know that if we generate more ideas we have a better chance of finding better ideas. Your goals should be to have a variety of approaches to help stimulate idea creation in your repertoire. By doing this you will improve the overall quality of ideas by having more to choose from.

The scene is repeated in meeting rooms around the world every day. A problem has been identified and a group has gathered to solve the problem. When ideas are needed, the group decides to brainstorm. And all too often this exercise leads to a short list of not-that-creative ideas.

We know that if we generate more ideas we have a better chance of finding better ideas. This leads us to the logical conclusion that if we can find techniques to create more ideas, we will find better ones. No one technique however will guarantee the perfect solution. Instead your goals should be to have a variety of approaches to help stimulate idea creation in your repertoire. By doing this you will improve the overall quality of ideas by having more to choose from.

Whether you are unhappy with the current creativity of your group or are having good success with brainstorming sessions, but would like them to be even better, any of the eight suggestions below can help.

Look at problems in different ways. Get the group to change their perspective on the problem. Once people lock into one way of looking at things the idea flow will slow to a trickle. Have people take a new persona. Ask them to look at the issue from the perspective of another group accounting, HR, or sales for example. Ask them to think about how their Grandmother or an 8-year-old would solve the problem. These are simple ways to force people into a new perspective and the new perspectives will generate more ideas.

Make novel combinations. The ideas that land on the flipchart or whiteboard in a brainstorming session are typically considered individually. Have the group look at the initial list and look for ways to combine the ideas into new ones.

Force relationships. Once a group is finished with their initial list, provide them with words, pictures or objects. The objects can be random items, the words can come from a randomly generated list (email wordlist@KevinEikenberry.com) and we'll send you such a list), or from pictures in magazines or newspapers. When people have their random word, picture or item, have them create connections between the problem and their item. Use questions like, how could this item solve our problem? What attributes of this item could help us solve our problem?

Make their thoughts visible. Have people draw! Too often the brainstorming session has everyone sitting except the person capturing the ideas. Let people doodle and draw and you never know what ideas may be spurred.

Think in opposites. Rather than asking your direct problem question, ask the opposite. How could we ensure no one bought this new product? could be one example. Capturing the ideas on the opposite, will illuminate ideas for solving the actual problem.

Think metaphorically. This approach is similar to forcing relationships (and is another way to use your words, pictures or items). Pick a random idea/item and ask the group, how is this item like our problem? Metaphors can be a very powerful way to create new ideas where none existed before.

Prepare. Too often people are asked to brainstorm a problem with no previous thinking time. If people have time to think about a topic, and let their brains work on it for a while, they will create more and better ideas. Allow people to be better prepared mentally by sharing the challenges you will be brainstorming some time before the meeting whenever possible.

Set a Goal. Research shows and my experience confirms that the simple act of giving people a quantity goal before starting the brainstorming session will lead to a longer list of ideas to consider. Set your goal at least a little higher than you think you can get and higher than this group typically achieves. Set the goal and watch the group reach it!

While these suggestions have all been written from the perspective of a group generating ideas, they all work very well for individuals too. The next time you need to solve a problem by yourself, use these techniques and you will be astounded by the quantity of ideas you will generate!.