

Brainstorming is a quick, effective method to generate ideas that can be used to solve some of the most challenging group problems. Brainstorming combats the silence which often accompanies group problems because it allows each member to voice ideas and opinions in a safe, nonjudgmental environment.

**When is brainstorming useful?**

Brainstorming is effective for dealing with all kinds of issues that groups face such as:

- 1) Developing a project theme
- 2) Deciding on group roles
- 3) Planning a method of presentation
- 4) Generating topic ideas
- 5) Creating a project time-line
- 6) Finding solutions to group conflicts
- 7) Solving complex problems

**When is brainstorming not a good idea?**

Brainstorming may not be the best solution when:

- 1) The problem has only one or two possible solutions
- 2) There is a great deal of tension within the group
- 3) Group members often fight over ownership of ideas or control of the group
- 4) The problem is interpersonal
- 5) The group is very large
- 6) The problem is not well defined

**Tips for effective brainstorming:**

- The key to good brainstorming is openness – there are no wrong ideas.
- Be creative. One way to do this is to have each group member think of one “out of the box” idea and build off of that.
- Hitchhiking, or building off of others’ ideas, can generate exciting and unique solutions.
- Don’t judge others’ ideas. This can intimidate people and increase group tension.
- Be a good listener. Concentrate on the speaker’s ideas rather than on what you plan to say next.
- Encourage participation. Even if someone doesn’t think of any original ideas, they can build off of what other people say. Some people in the group may take longer than others to get involved.
- Be realistic about the feasibility of solutions so you don’t waste time trying to implement creative but implausible ideas.
- Set realistic time limits for the session.

**Alternate method for brainstorming:**

There are information management tools such as ThinkTank, where 10-20 people collectively brainstorm an idea simultaneously. It not only collects hundreds of ideas in a few minutes, it has the advantage of keeping contributions anonymous. With this kind of tool, everyone sees all the other good ideas being generated real-time, which generates additional ideas in a continuous flow of thought. The sessions can be recorded for study later, and include methods to “vote,” or “prioritize,” thoughts to make analysis of the data much easier.

*Source: The Schreyer Institute for Innovation in Learning*