

Brainstorming Insights



Cheryl Kartes - Mon, Apr 9, 2012 5:23 PM

Creativity Colleagues,

The articles below were in a recent link from a LinkedIn Group, so I didn't realize until I got them in the box here that they are "older" information. Perhaps we can copy and paste other Brainstorming Insights into this "discussion" to keep track of some of our discoveries.

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From FastCompany

Seven Secrets to Good Brainstorming

Generating rafts of good ideas is Ideo's business. Here's how this world-class product-development firm keeps the lightbulbs blazing bright.

BY [Linda Tischler](#) | February 28, 2001

When all the current cost cutting is over and business models begin to make sense again, Tom Kelley believes that one thing will differentiate winning companies from also-rans: their ability to innovate.

Allow Kelley his bias. Author of *The Art of Innovation: Lessons in Creativity from Ideo, America's Leading Design Firm* (Doubleday, 2001) and general manager of Ideo Product Development, one of the world's premiere product-development firms, Kelley has innovation coursing through his veins. But even discounting Kelley's evangelism, there's merit in his argument.

According to *The Economist's* Innovation Survey, half of the U.S. economy's current growth comes from companies that didn't exist 10 years ago. Corporate titans have learned to fear the prodigy in his dorm room or the garage-based whiz kid who's forging a bullet with their company's name on it. "Innovate or die" is not an idle threat. It's the harsh reality of the modern, fast-forward economy.

Silicon Valley-based Ideo has sparked some of the most innovative products of the past decade -- the Apple mouse, the Polaroid I-Zone Pocket Camera, and the Palm V, among others. But Ideo staffers don't just sit around waiting for good ideas to pop into their heads. The company has institutionalized a process whereby ideas are coaxed to the surface through regular, structured brainstorming sessions. At Ideo, idea-generation exercises are "practically a religion," Kelley says.

On any given day, multiple brainstorming sessions may spawn hundreds of ideas and burn through just as many chocolate-chip cookies, the preferred fuel of world-class idea mongers. Indeed, collective idea generation is so important at Ideo that a staffer caught trying to noodle a problem alone at his desk may be called on the carpet for wasting his time and the client's money.

"The social ecology at many American companies says that when you're stuck, you're supposed to go back to your desk and think harder, because you were hired for your skills," Kelley says. "At Ideo, the culture is exactly the opposite. You have a social obligation to get help."

But a poorly planned brainstorming session could cause more harm than good, Kelley points out. (See [Six Surefire Ways to Kill a Brainstorm.](#)) That's why Ideo follows strict rules for sparking good ideas.

Some are simple truths: Morning meetings work best; 3 - 10 participants should take part; and cookies always spur creativity. Some, like those outlined below, are a bit more refined.

1. Sharpen the focus.

Start with a well-honed statement of the problem at hand. Edgy is better than fuzzy. The best topic statements focus *outward* on a specific customer need or service enhancement rather than *inward* on some organizational goal.

2. Write playful rules.

Ideo's primary brainstorming rules are simple: "Defer judgment" and "One conversation at a time." The firm believes in its rules so strongly that they're stenciled in 8-inch letters on conference-room walls. "If I'm the facilitator and somebody starts a critique or people start talking, I can enforce the rules without making it feel personal," Kelley says. Other rules include, "Go for quantity," "Be visual," and "Encourage wild ideas."

3. Number your ideas.

"This rule seems counterintuitive -- the opposite of creativity," Kelley says. "But numbered lists create goals to motivate participants. You can say, 'Let's try to get

to 100 ideas.' Also, lists provide a reference point if you want to jump back and forth between ideas."

4. Build and jump.

Most brainstorming sessions follow a power curve: They start out slowly, build to a crescendo, and then start to plateau. The best facilitators nurture the conversation in its early stages, step out of the way as the ideas start to flow, and then jump in again when energy starts to peter out.

"We go for two things in a brainstorm: fluency and flexibility," Kelley says. "Fluency is a very rapid flow of ideas, so there's never more than a moment of silence. Flexibility is approaching the same idea from different viewpoints."

5. Make the space remember.

Good facilitators should also write ideas down on an accessible surface. Ideo used to hold its brainstorms in rooms wallpapered with whiteboards or butcher paper. Lately, however, the group has started using easel-sized Post-it notes. "When the facilitator tries to pull together all the ideas after the session," Kelley says, "she can stack up nice, tidy rectangular things instead of spreading butcher paper all the way down the hall."

6. Stretch your mental muscles.

Brainstorming, like marathon running, should begin with warm-up exercises. Ideo studied various methods of prepping for a session. For a project on the toy industry, for example, Ideo divided the group into three teams: The first team did no preparation. The second listened to a lecture on the technology involved and read background books. The third team took a field trip to a toy store. Far and away, the toy-store team produced ideas in greater quantity and quality than the other two.

7. Get physical.

At Ideo, brainstorming sessions are often occasions for show-and-tell. Participants bring examples of competitors' products, objects that relate to the problem, or elegant solutions from other fields as springboards for ideas. Ideo also keeps materials on hand -- blocks, foam core, tubing -- to build crude models of a concept..

Six Surefire Ways to Kill a Brainstorm

Coming up with good ideas -- even in an ideal environment -- is hard work. But these tactics will guarantee failure.

BY [Linda Tischler](#) | February 28, 2001

A poorly planned brainstorming session could cause more harm than good. And more frustration than anything else. That's why Silicon Valley design firm Ideo follows strict rules for sparking good ideas.

These are not those rules.

The six strategies below are absolute no-no's -- surefire innovation killers from Tom Kelley, general manager of Ideo Product Development. Learn what *not* to do and then read Kelley's [Seven Secrets to Good Brainstorming](#).

1. Let the boss speak first.

Nothing kills a brainstorming session like a dominating CEO or the brownnosers who rush to agree with his every statement. Ideo recommends that bosses lock themselves out of idea-generation sessions all together. Send him out for doughnuts, and you'll get better results.

2. Give everybody a turn.

Kelley remembers packing 16 people into a room for one particular meeting. Each person had two minutes to speak. It was democratic. It was painful. It was pointless. It was a performance, not a brainstorm. "In a real brainstorm, the focus should never be on just one person," Kelley says.

3. Ask the experts only.

When it comes to generating truly innovative ideas, deep expertise in a field can actually be a drawback. "In a brainstorm, we're looking for breadth," Kelley says. Cross-pollination from seemingly unrelated fields can lead to authentic breakthroughs.

4. Go off-site.

By conducting off-site brainstorming sessions, you only reinforce the concept that great ideas only come on the beach or at high altitudes -- not in the proximity of your daily work.

5. No silly stuff.

Kelley remembers one brainstorming session doomed by the boss's opening remarks: All ideas had to result in something the firm could patent and manufacture. The silence that followed was deafening. Silly is important. Wild ideas are welcome. Brainstorming should be fun.

6. Write down everything.

Obsessive note taking is toxic to brainstorming. It shifts the focus to the wrong side of the brain. It makes the session feel like History 101. Doodles and sketches are fine. A short note that preserves a thought is acceptable. But detailed writing destroys momentum, dissipates energy, and distracts from the main purpose of the exercise: unfettered thinking. Each session should have an assigned scribe who records suggestions. And that person should *not* be the group facilitator.