

# Brainstorming Guide

**Brainstorm:** (n.) a group problem-solving technique that involves the spontaneous contribution of ideas from all members group; (v.) the creative generation of ideas by one or more individuals in an attempt to devise or find a solution to a problem.

## Brainstorming Guidelines

Brainstorming is a creative skill that you will use at several stages of your Design Thinking process. It provides the venue for our craziest ideas to be heard without judgment; even the most impossible notions might beget a breakthrough. The outcome of your brainstorm relies on your imagination, and like any other skill--you get better with practice. There are, however, some tips that will make you and your team more successful:

**1. Choose your brainstorm goal:** What are you trying to accomplish with your brainstorm? To come up with as many new ideas to approach your looming design challenge? Or to build out a specific solution or idea?

**2. Think big:** Be free to think way outside of the box. Nothing is too radical. It's much easier to scale back a big idea than it is to try and build up a small one. You'll find more inspirational solutions by being open.

**3. Build on others' ideas:** Your group will achieve the best results if you help build and extend each other's ideas. Don't dismiss someone's idea because it's silly or "out there"--it may help inspire a fantastic solution. Instead, riff on an idea and see where else you can take it.

**4. Don't evaluate yet:** Brainstorming is a way to give way to ideas we've been too busy or close-minded to think of before. Evaluation will come later -- for now, focus on generating big, crazy ideas. As Picasso said, "Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist as we grow up." Try tapping into that childish wonder.

**5. More is more:** Set a goal for your team, like brainstorming 60 ideas in a half an hour! Move quickly by being concise when you share your ideas; avoid spending time trying to convince others of your idea. There will be time to work out your ideas later, but for now, focus on having as many as possible.

**6. Do it alone or together:** Brainstorming can be done on your own or with a group; both methods have benefits, depending on how you and your group like to work. Try going back and forth between coming up with ideas on your own and sharing with the group.

# Brainstorming Checklist

Before you begin brainstorming, use the list below to make sure you're prepared.

- **Assign a brainstorming facilitator:** Choose someone who is adept at feeling the energy of the room and extracting great ideas out of people. Even if you aren't the facilitator, you should read the facilitation guide to familiarize yourself with the activities.
- **Gather the team:** Make sure you plan a time when all the members of your team can be present. You may consider including others that may have valuable input, especially those that see the challenge from a different point of view. Include people who can build on ideas (rather than naysayers). Refer to your Stakeholder activity in the Define phase for ideas.
- **Choose the environment:** Choose a space that encourages informality and creativity. The environment should have ample wall space for post-its or writing down ideas.
- **Decide on the timetable:** Brainstorming ideas can happen over several hours or over several days. Feel free to find the right amount of time for your group. Be aware that it is easy to burn out, so agreeing on a set amount of time or number of generated ideas will help. We recommend at least half an hour for warm-up exercises and at least one hour for brainstorming.
- **Prep materials:** Gather post-its, markers, larger sheets of paper, snacks... and anything else to facilitate the generation of ideas. Also, post your design challenge and design principles on the whiteboard or wall. You can use them to inspire new solutions.
- **Decide on documentation:** Make sure to take some pictures of the brainstorming session. These may be helpful to remember some ideas that your group had, and to provide visuals for your project's story.

Now that you have prepped your brainstorming space and set a timetable, the next steps will be gathering everyone together!

# Brainstorming Warm-Ups

Here are a few quick brainstorming warm-up activities your team can use to spark your creativity. Take 10-15 minutes for these activities before you begin brainstorming.

## Random Idea Generator

- Have teams of 2 randomly choose two nouns and combine them to make new product or offering (You can do a Google search to find a random word generator).
- Take 5 minutes for partner groups to collaborate on giving this new product a name and a tagline, and describing it's features and benefits.
- Have everyone share out what they've come up with. Be clever! Be creative!

## Lateral Connections

- Have each person take a piece of paper. On one side, write down one thing you like to do on the weekends. On the other side, write down an issue you'd like to address - either work-related or personal. This should take 2 mins.
- Have people pair up. One person will begin by stating their issue. The other person will read their weekend activity, phrasing it in the context of "My idea for you is to...".
- Take 3 minutes for the issue owner to discuss how they can use the weekend activity to think of 3 plusses or benefits about how this activity could be used to address the issue.
- Switch and do the same for the other person's issues.
- As a larger group, free to share how it felt to go through this exercise and interesting connections they made.

# Creativity Interventions

If creativity is stalled during the brainstorm, try using one of the techniques below.

## **Roadblock removal**

Eliminate assumed constraints. Tell the group there is no limit on costs, or time, or other resources. They can think as big or expensive as their minds allow. Removing a roadblock might free new directions of ideas that wouldn't have been considered otherwise.

## **Break the rules**

Take the opposite approach as the roadblock removal. Rather than ignoring the project's constraints, list the barriers and, one by one, generate ideas for how to break them.

## **Provocation**

Eliminate elements of the challenge that are taken for granted. "What if classrooms had no desks?", "What if there were no principals?" Posing outrageous statements forces you to think in different and original ways.

## **Opposite experience**

Get the group to describe, in detail, the opposite of what you want to have happen. "What's the worst experience possible?" At the peak of momentum, shift gears the other way. "Okay. We know what we don't want. How do we achieve the opposite of this?" Not only is it fun, it gets people to share their ideas and encourages them to be clever.

## **Brainwriting**

Have each person write down or sketch a beginning of an idea on a piece of paper. After 2 minutes, everyone passes their piece of paper to their neighbor, who continues to build the idea. Continue to repeat this process until the piece of paper gets back to its originator. Once complete, each person shares the final result to add them to your brainstormed ideas.

## **Random idea generator**

Taking inspiration from this warm-up exercise, choose a random concept and, using this concept, think about how you could apply it to a solution for your design challenge. For instance, how might a "dog walker" inspire solutions for personalized learning for students? Or how might a "peanut factory" inspire solutions for increasing teacher collaboration?