Brainstorming Meetings That Yield Great Ideas

The goal of brainstorming is to use creative thinking to generate as many ideas as possible for an issue or problem. The secrets to getting a lot of high-quality ideas are 1) Accept ALL responses, even, and especially, the crazy ones—it fosters free association and helps people come up with realistic ideas, 2) Don't evaluate ideas as they come out, 3) Ask everyone to phrase ideas as statements vs questions— questions invite evaluation by causing people to start figuring out how to implement the idea, and 4) Never put anyone's idea down or comment that it "won't work because…"—nothing puts the brakes on the flow of ideas more than critical, negative comments.

Prepare for the session

- Set up a relaxed, fun atmosphere. The more comfortable people feel, the better they can tap into the right side of their brain.
- If people are new to one another, there's discomfort among group members, or they're typically a pretty quiet group, set up a short icebreaker. Something simple like, "Let's warm up by going around the room and telling what you had for dinner last night, OR what your all-time favorite movie is, OR a TV show you watch that your embarrassed to say you like."
- Arrange chairs in a circle, a U-shape, or around a table so that everyone can see everyone else. Don't use theater style setting or any arrangement where anyone's back is to others.
- Set 1 or 2 flipchart stands with plenty of paper on each. Have masking tape and colorful markers. You can also project a computer screen but use font large enough that all participants can easily read the ideas as they're posted. We don't like computer screens because once the screen fills up, you can't see the earlier ideas.
- Ask someone to scribe who won't be participating in the brainstorming. It's hard to contribute and record at the same time.
- How to scribe:
  o Record ALL ideas on flipchart. Every time someone throws out an idea, write it down. It encourages participation, it validates responses, and when others see the response in writing, the visual helps them to come up with new ideas.
  o As much as possible, write the idea *using the participant's own words*. If its too long and wordy, ask the participant, "Could you give me that idea in 1 short sentence?"
  o Use colors to stimulate creativity and right brain activity. We like to alternate 2 contrasting colors keeping a different color marker in each hand.
- The discussion can be led by the group's leader or, in an ideal situation, a trained facilitator from outside the group.

During the session

1. The group's leader starts by stating the purpose of the brainstorming, taking no more than 2-5 minutes. Post the issue or problem that's being brainstormed in one concise sentence at the top of the flip chart page. Clearly define the problem you want to solve along with any criteria that need to be met.
2. The leader or the facilitator reviews the ground rules. Keep these posted so that they're visible throughout the meeting. NOTE: Steps 1 and 2 should take no longer than 5 minutes—the longer people sit listening and inactive, the more their creative thinking shuts down.
3. Here's a suggested agenda with suggested times. Provide this agenda—it'll help the left-brainers buy in better and give them a roadmap and that sense of purpose and closure they need:

Issue or problem clarification & ground rules review	5 mins.
Brainstorming	45 – 90 mins.
Analyze and evaluate	45 – 90 mins.
Select	15 – 60 mins.

4. Post and review these ground rules:

> Go for quantity
> There are no bad ideas
> Invite humor
> Phrase your idea as a statement vs a question
> Don't analyze or evaluate the ideas
> Build off one another's ideas
> Crazy ideas often spur realistic ideas so don't hold back
> It's OK to stand up and move around

5. Give participants 10 minutes or so of quiet time to write down as many of their ideas as they can. This helps get the best thinking of the introverted thinkers as well as the extraverted ones.
6. Restate the issue or problem and ask for participants to start calling out their ideas. Remind people that they can stand, sit on the floor, pace, etc. Guide the conversation:
   o Accept ALL responses, even, and especially, the funny ones. It helps people come up with realistic responses when they see the goofy ones.
   o If someone asks a question, ask him/er to rephrase as a statement.
   o If someone says something evaluative, remind him/er to save it for the evaluation phase
   o Restate the one-sentence issue or problem during silences. It jogs peoples' minds, especially the auditory participants and is also a way to bring an off-track discussion back on track.
   o Be prepared with follow-on questions to spur thinking about sub-topics under the main topic. For example, if the main topic is "Ways to live out our brand of 'we treat you like

family' on a daily basis," sub-topic questions might be, "How do we live it out with our customers? With our community? With our providers?"

- o Don't spend too much time on any one train of thought—keep the discussion moing and changing.
- o If there's a lull in the energy, ask everyone to stand up and move to a different seat.

After the brainstorming, analyze, evaluate, and select

Give people a sense of closure and satisfaction that they've contributed something and that the work they just did is valuable by letting them participate in combining, organizing, prioritizing, and even voting.

1. Look for ways to combine ideas—use a different color marker to circle similar ideas.
2. Strike any crazy, obviously-not-gonna-work ideas.
3. Prioritize or rank the remaining ideas. Options:
   a. Rank High-Medium-Low or numerically
   b. Use a show of hands
   c. Give each people 3-5 "votes" and ask them to walk up to the charts and place a tick mark next to their top ideas.

You may want to use the group to continue evaluating and ranking or you may be done with the group at this point. In any case, thank them for their time and effort.

One final thought... so often, we engage our teams in brainstorming or giving their feedback and then never get back with them to let them know what their work has meant to us or what we did with it. Please, tell them what you're going to do with the work they've just done. And double please, get back with them later to give them an update! Especially if you ever want to re-engage them in another brainstorming session.