

The Art of Brainstorming

*Right now, someone on your payroll has
a great business idea; here's how to find it*



Whether you have 10 employees at one site or several dozen spread over a handful of locations, these individuals are reservoirs of information. Collectively, they're skilled in all aspects of your business; from customers' needs and spending patterns to product trends, to stock patterns and inventory, to sales.

"If you want to get your business to the next level, input from your employees is key. These are the people with their 'hands in the clay' every day. They know what needs to be improved upon," said Frank De Raffe, founder and president of ProActive Leadership Center in Wappingers Falls, N.Y.

Wondering how to tap into this knowledge? One approach is to make brainstorming meetings a regular habit. Whether you're trying to solve a problem or planning for the future, soliciting employee feedback can yield valid ideas and new solutions.

FOUR BASIC PRINCIPLES

Brainstorming is an age-old practice in which a group comes together to exchange thoughts freely. The concept became popular in the 1950s with Alex Osborn's book *Applied Imagination*. Osborn, known as the "father of brainstorming," shared insight that changed the way people and companies approach problems.

He suggested that meetings should stress four concepts for effective brainstorming:

- **Focus on quantity:** Encourage employees to speak freely. The more ideas, the more likely you'll arrive upon a solution.
- **Prohibit negativity:** People will speak more readily if they don't fear criticism; make sure all comments are met with respect.



• **Welcome the unusual:** This is best described by Osborn's quote, "It is easier to tone down a wild idea than to think up a new one."

• **Combine and improve ideas:** Encourage group interaction and feeding off one another's thoughts.

While business practices have changed since the 1950s, Osborn's four principals are still the backbone of any good brainstorming session.

PLAN YOUR SESSION

Like any effective meeting, a bit of planning is required before pulling together a group and hoping ideas will flow.

First, give your attendees advance notice—a few days ahead of your meeting, announce the topics to be discussed. Reassure employees that they aren't expected to have earth-shattering ideas. "It's the little things that matter. It doesn't have to be a big, mind-blowing idea. It can be something very simple that can make all the difference to the business, the customer and the bottom line," said De Raffe.

Hold your meeting in a quiet room, or off-site, if possible. Choose a time of day with minimal distractions; avoid times of high customer activity, or when people are preoccupied with getting home on time. Providing refreshments can help the group loosen up.

An intimate group is more conducive to conversation, so keep your attendance low. If your team is large, choose one representative from each area, asking them to pool their groups' ideas before the meeting.

Pulling together representatives from different areas is common practice at Spectrum Paint, based in Tulsa, Okla. "Managers from marketing, sales, purchasing come together to discuss common trends or things coming up in the field," said Gentry Stafford, marketing manager at Spectrum. "Regional managers will also hold their own monthly meetings."

While it might be tempting to offer an incentive—particularly if you're facing a time crunch or major problem—a better approach might be to work toward building a relationship where employees want to be part of the solution, De Raffe suggested.

"I would give recognition awards. Doesn't have to be anything major, just the idea of recognizing them publicly in front of their peers," he said. "If (employees) feel appreciated and respected, they have all the incentive they need."

APPOINT A LEADER

You'll need a leader for the meeting, someone who will take notes and keep things organized. Taking notes in a visible manner, such as on a whiteboard or shared device, will help everyone reflect and stay on topic.

"This person will help facilitate discussions, keep track of ideas and deadlines, and step in when there needs to be a decision," said Kerri Garbis, president of Ovation Communications outside Boston.

For brainstorming to succeed, everyone needs to feel comfortable contributing, "not only the voices of a confident few," said Garbis. Make sure the leader is willing to reel in anyone who is overpowering or critical, as well as gently reach out to anyone who's hesitant to join in.

WEEDING THINGS OUT

An abundance of ideas is a desirable result, but that can also inhibit forward progress. "Passions can run high; people get attached to their own ideas," said Garbis, who suggests filtering the ideas at natural transitions, announcing "Let's move forward with ideas A and B."

If it becomes difficult for people to move on, a timer can help. Give a stale issue another five or seven minutes, then move on.

With creativity flowing, you're bound to hear ideas that are irrelevant to the current agenda, but good ideas nonetheless. Resist derailing your current agenda by going off in a new direction. Instead, tell your note taker to maintain a list of "off the topic" thoughts, then plan to discuss them in the appropriate setting.



MAKE IT ROUTINE

Don't be discouraged if your first meetings aren't a big success. People need time to feel comfortable with the process before opening up. As these meetings become more regular, your results will improve.

Familiarity has helped Spectrum Paints enjoy productive brainstorming meetings. "The (attendees) all know each other, so it's a very open group," Stafford said. "It's definitely been an important aspect of our business. Things can get busy, so it's important to stop and get together to check in, whether we're just discussing new trends, ways to improve employee training, or changes to the products."

A creative industry such as painting and decorating can benefit greatly from frequent exchanging of ideas and feedback. Drawing upon your on-site knowledge can save money and time, while keeping your business a step ahead of the rest. ●

~Debbie Swanson