

FROM CONVENTIONAL TO CREATIVE

“The things we fear most in organizations – fluctuations, disturbances, imbalances – are the primary sources of creativity.”

– MARGARET J. WHEATLEY

Purpose

To provide the opportunity to practice creative questioning through brainstorming.

Background

Many people have talked themselves into believing they are not creative. Pablo Picasso said it this way: *“All children are artists. The problem is how to remain an artist once we grow up.”* The truth is that whenever we open our minds to a different process, perspective, or idea, we are unleashing our creativity.

One way to explore our creativity is to approach any given situation by asking unique questions in a unique way. This process will provide a model for asking questions that will produce fresh perspectives and powerful root-cause solutions. When a person looks beyond his/her own point of view and becomes curious about other possibilities, s/he can effectively respond to a more accurate reality, and, thus, produce significant outcomes.

This process will also combine creative questioning with brainstorming. Most challenges in life and in business are not solved automatically by the first idea that comes to mind. To achieve the best solution, it is important to consider many possible solutions. A method of doing this is through brainstorming, which is “a technique of solving specific problems, amassing information, stimulating creative thinking, developing new ideas, etc. by unrestrained and spontaneous participation in discussion.”¹ Brainstorming is a powerful approach to looking at situations both in business and in life differently. Throughout the world, man has formulated incredible ideas and inventions through creative questioning and brainstorming.

Process

This four-step process requires one piece of notebook paper per person, pens/pencils, markers, and flip-chart paper.

1 Step One: Individual Brainstorming

1. Provide the group with a challenge the organization is currently facing.
2. Have each person in the group copy the following matrix on his/her sheet of paper:

My (Individual) Perception	Response (Feelings & Behavior)	Current Result

2 Step Two: Group Brainstorming

Label three flip-chart sheets with the three column headings below. Record answers from each individual in the group.

Group Perceptions	Group Responses (Feelings & Behavior)	Group's Current Results

3 Step Three: Apply Creative Questioning to Brainstorming Process

1. Post three different pieces of flip-chart paper. Write each of the following types of questions on a different flip chart.
2. You can break the group into subgroups and assign each subgroup to one type of question or remain in your original brainstorming group.
3. Brainstorm non-linked questions to gain fresh perspectives on the situation. Non-linked questions are unusual questions that link dissimilar ideas together. For example (from the book *Freakonomics*), one might ask, "How is the Ku Klux Klan like a group of real-estate agents?" or "What do school teachers and Sumo wrestlers have in common?" These types of questions begin to unleash creativity.
4. Brainstorm reverse questions. Ask the opposite of the question you want to pose and apply the results. For example, an organization brainstorming how to increase customer satisfaction using reversal might ask, "How could I reduce customer satisfaction?" rather than "How could I improve customer satisfaction?" Reversal provides a new perspective that provokes participants to think differently.
5. Brainstorm solution seeking questions. Taken from Rapport's article of the month, look for practices or procedures that could use a facelift, and explore what methods the company presently uses to solve problems. While some may find this activity uncomfortable at first, this practice ultimately unleashes a spirit of discovery and child-like curiosity. When we seek ways to improve how we accomplish tasks, we are putting our creativity to work in practical and fulfilling ways and marking ourselves as leaders of innovation.
6. Write the questions and brainstorm answers to them on the flip-chart sheets.
7. If you have separated into subgroups, have the groups come back and share their answers and questions.

Non-Linked Questions	Reverse Questions	Problem Finding Questions
----------------------	-------------------	---------------------------

4 Step Four: Apply Enlightened Learning from Creative Brainstorming Process

1. Post three different pieces of flip-chart paper. Write each of the following column titles on a different flip-chart sheet.
2. Come together as one brainstorming group to record the following on the flip-chart sheets:
 - a. New Perceptions – What new perceptions have been gained based on applying these three types of creative questions?
 - b. Enlightened Responses – What are the new feelings, behaviors and actions of the group based on the new perceptions?
 - c. Anticipated Results – Based on the new perceptions of the situation and the enlightened responses, what results will we achieve?

New Perceptions	Enlightened Responses (Feelings & Behavior)	Anticipated Results
-----------------	--	---------------------

Example of Creative Brainstorming Process

Situation:

Employee turnover in the organization is continuing to increase and has risen from 25% to 75% in one year.

The organization needs to reduce turnover to prevent loss in profitability and skill set.

Step One: Individual Brainstorming

My (Individual) Perception	Response (Feelings & Behavior)	Current Result
Hiring the wrong people is our #1 cause of employee turnover.	<p>Hire an assessment agency to conduct pre-hire assessments.</p> <p>Focus on improving managers' interviewing skills.</p> <p>Hire a company to perform background checks prior to hire.</p>	<p>Hiring process takes longer.</p> <p>Difficult to hire which makes managers more likely to keep substandard employees.</p> <p>Increased hiring costs which negatively affect productivity.</p>

Step Two: Group Brainstorming

Group Perceptions	Group Responses (Feelings & Behavior)	Group's Current Results
<p>Management is poorly trained which negatively impacts retention.</p> <p>Training is the #1 cause of employee turnover – no one knows how to be successful.</p> <p>Compensation is the cause of all our company's turnover.</p> <p>Management gets rid of people they dislike.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Resentment - Lack of trust in management - Frustration - Anger - Tired / Overworked - Blame 	<p>Lack of productivity.</p> <p>Lack of focus – too many people doing too many jobs.</p>

Step Three: Apply Creative Questioning to Brainstorming Process

Non-Related Questions	Reverse Questions	Problem Finding Questions
<p>What is the correlation between employee turnover and management training?</p> <p>What are the similarities between traffic lights on the highway and employee turnover?</p> <p>How is strategic planning related to employee turnover?</p>	<p>Reverse the question, "What do those leaving have in common?" to "What do people who are staying have in common?"</p> <p>Reverse "Why are people leaving?" to "Why are people staying?"</p> <p>Reverse "What does the right person look like?" to "What does the wrong person look like?"</p>	<p>What is an acceptable level of turnover to support an environment where productivity is rewarded and non-productive tenure is not?</p> <p>What does it cost the company to lose the right employees?</p> <p>What is our current retention budget?</p> <p>What does turnover cost the organization as a whole and what should our retention budget be?</p>

Step Four: Apply Enlightened Learning from Creative Brainstorming Process

New Perceptions	Enlightened Responses (Feelings & Behavior)	Anticipated Results
<p>There are multiple reasons for our employee turnover. After asking the creative questions, we determined that 95% of the employees we lost felt they were unappreciated and their managers were not equipped to train them to do their jobs properly. They had this in common with the people who stayed and stayed because they had faith that upper management would fix the problem.</p>	<p>Trust that management cares about how I am feeling and is willing to look at my perception.</p> <p>Support – I want to help fix the employee turnover problem because I understand it from many different angles now.</p> <p>Focus on the true root causes of turnover in the organization:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on increasing competency through training. • Reward productive tenure. • Train managers to provide positive feedback on a regular basis. 	<p>Within one year, we will achieve our goal of reducing turnover from 75% to 25%.</p>

Effective Brainstorming Tips

To run a group brainstorming session effectively, do the following:

- Define the problem you want solved clearly, and lay out any pre-determined objectives.
- Keep the session focused on the situation.
- Ensure that no one criticizes or evaluates ideas during the session. Criticism introduces an element of risk for group members who put ideas forward. Fear of criticism stifles creativity and cripples the free flow of ideas.
- Encourage an enthusiastic, uncritical attitude among group members. Get everyone to contribute and develop ideas, even the quietest group members.
- Create a fun brainstorming environment. Encourage group(s) to produce as many ideas as possible, from the solidly practical to the wildly impractical. Welcome creativity! Consider throwing candy to the person with the most creative, outlandish idea(s).
- Ensure that no single train of thought continues too long.
- Encourage group members to develop other people's ideas or to use other ideas to create new ones.
- Appoint one person to write down ideas generated from the session. A good way of doing this is to use a flip chart. This information is then available for study and evaluation after the session.

Who is involved? How long? Where?

Conducted in your conference room, or at an offsite location, these sessions involve about 12 to 20 people. Invite participants from all levels of the organization and diverse specialties such as marketing, advertising, sales, research, public relations, and communications. A session may take as little time as one hour. The longer it continues, however, the greater the number of ideas. As Nobel-Prize-winner Dr. Linus Pauling said, *"The best way to get a good idea – is to get a lot of ideas."*

Conclusion

Group brainstorming can be very effective as it uses the experience and creativity of all group members. When individual members reach their limit on an idea, another member's creativity and experience can take that idea to the next level.

Brainstorming in a group can be risky for some individuals. Valuable but strange suggestions may appear odd at first. The most powerful brainstorming sessions encourage these "strange" ideas, for they spur organizations and individuals into new ways of thinking, which is the beginning of change. Encourage yourself and your organization to accept different questions, new perspectives, and answers to never-before-asked questions.

Exercise your organization's creativity as well as your own. Be a child again. Have fun!

“Inspect every piece of pseudo-science and you will find a security blanket, a thumb to suck, a skirt to hold. What have we to offer in exchange? Uncertainty! Insecurity!”