



BETTER BRAINSTO

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– Helen Keller*

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In the circus of the professional world, I get to play the role of lion tamer – feeding, wrangling, and demanding jaw dropping performances from creative minds that are much more powerful than my own. I don't use a whip or a chair. I am a creative facilitator and brainstorming is the strongest weapon in my arsenal.



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Guidelines for Unleashing Group Genius

By Bob Kodzis

It's a tricky business. To pull it off with finesse, you need to play many roles: One part scientist, one part artist, one part counselor, one part coach, one part referee and one part muse. Altogether, that's a lot of parts.

During the last 20 years, I've facilitated hundreds of brainstorming sessions. Most of them were very successful, although I have to admit I've learned more from the ones that crashed and burned.

Looking back over all of them, the good, the bad and the ugly, I've discovered some great tools and some practical techniques that make the process a lot more fun and effective. I want to share some of these with you. Read on and take what is useful – lose everything else.

SETTING SOME GROUND RULES

Although rules and creativity typically go together like a bowling ball and a champagne glass, brainstorming ground rules are designed to create and maintain an environment that fosters creative courage and expression. Enforcement of these guidelines is not a violation of the creative spirit but an elevation of that spirit.

Designing your ground rules is like designing safety walls for your creative trampoline. Make them firm, but pliable; solid, but forgiving. Make sure they take nothing away from the height and the joy of the bounce. They are there to protect people and empower them to try a few mental backflips.

We always start the ground rules by defining the ultimate goal of the meeting. We need to answer the question: What the heck are we trying to accomplish during this meeting? Do not skip

CREATING A SAFE PLACE... SOMEWHERE ELSE

One of the greatest enemies of creativity is fear: fear of looking stupid, fear of failure, and worrying about what other people are thinking. By suppressing the fear factor, we open the door to a much bolder way of thinking.

The only way to overcome this daunting detractor is to create a safe environment; a place free of criticism and harsh judgment, a place where wild imaginings can happen and anything is possible. The right ground rules will go a long way toward helping to create a safe environment. I also recommend that you also take your creative group out of their everyday work environment. Find someplace fun or just someplace else. Different surroundings inspire different ideas.

PAY ATTENTION

As a facilitator, it's your job to continually assess how the process is going and how the participants are feeling. If there is a lull in the energy, or if the meeting is out of control or if one participant shatters the ego of another with a negative comment, it's your job to find a way to correct the problem. Own it. People will work harder for you and they will thank you later. Look, listen, feel...then act!

BALANCING STRUCTURE AND FREE FLOW

While too much structure can force the process to be stale, rote and dull. Lack of structure very often translates to lack of direction, progress and productivity. Again the axiom of "balance in all things" rings true. Some structure is critical – as in the ground rules and the goal of the session. Beyond that, you need to feel your way to the right balance. A strong flow of creativity is awesome, but only if it's going in the right direction.

FORCING THEM TO S-T-R-E-T-C-H

Most of the creative gurus I know have gone through life amazing the people around them while only using a small proportion of their total creative capacity. (Lance Armstrong doesn't have to pedal

very fast to leave the average bikers in his dust) Like the rest of us, they don't want to work any harder than they have to.

Understanding the capacity of the thinkers in your brainstorming session will empower you to push them harder and make them reach further. It increases the thrill for them and the quality and range of ideas for your process. Don't settle. Make them stretch.

BRMNING

this step no matter how difficult it is to hone in on the purpose of your session. I've seen many long and frustrating brainstorming sessions whose Achilles heels were simply the failure to clearly define the challenge at hand. There's great truth to the statement, "A problem well defined is a problem half solved."

"Be careful if you don't know where you're going, because you might not get there"
– Yogi Berra

INFORMATION AND CONNECTIONS

A brilliant friend once distilled the concept of creativity down to one sentence:

"It's about the range and depth of information that you have and the connections you can make with that information."

It's too simple, and too true.

The greatest creative minds I have ever encountered are those filled with wildly diverse information and the ability to make that knowledge relevant by connecting it in a meaningful way, to the challenge at hand.

I find it valuable to feed information into the minds of the creative brains throughout the brainstorming process. I recommend a solid mixture of both relevant and random information. If there are facts that are germane to the project, by all means, share them with the group. At the same time, introduce other, less relevant, information that will spark their imaginations and inspire them to think differently.

When designing roller coasters for Vekoma, the largest rollercoaster manufacturer in the world, my team brought in dozens of magazines from National Geographic Explorer to Tattoo Magazine to Barbie Collectibles. Our only goal was to open their minds and poke in some new and interesting information. The connections were up to the creative thinkers. The results were magic.

LET THEM PLAY

*"A little nonsense now and then
is cherished by the wisest men"
– Willy Wonka*

Play is so valuable to learning and interacting. I have a huge chest full of toys that I bring to many brainstorming sessions. Toys and fun loosen people up. Loose people make better creative thinkers (*you know what I mean*).

You'll be amazed at how just the smell of Play Doh can take a mature professional right back to their childhood...to a time when the hard boundaries of their creativity had not yet been formed. It's a beautiful thing.

Let them play and then watch the ideas start to flow.

THE CARE AND CONTROL OF CREATIVE EGOS

*"Insecurity is the handmaiden of creativity."
– Chuck Jones*

A word on creative egos: They are real. They are to be respected. But they are not to be feared. Many times obnoxious creative bravado is a mask for some pretty hefty insecurities. Understanding that has made me look differently at the creative souls with whom I have surrounded myself. It has helped to make me more sensitive toward, and more effective in dealing with people whose job it is to generate brilliance on a daily basis.

I love eccentric behavior. I love quirky creative customs and cultures. They only become a problem when they interfere with other people's ability to contribute whole-heartedly. The basic rule is simple: If you can't play nice, you don't play. In truth, nobody is indispensable. (*Sorry if that hurts your creative ego.*)

When it comes to pure creative Prima Donna behavior, our trusty ground rules are invaluable.

NEVER TAKE YOUR EYES OFF THE BALL

Play is great. Fun is wonderful. Joking is a joy. But if we lose sight of the goal, all is lost. There are many ways to steer a group back to the challenge at hand. The trick is to do so without becoming a task master or slave driver. Find ways to appreciate fun digression while returning to the path. But always return to the path.

KNOW WHEN TO WALK AWAY

As a final note, life is not perfect. Sometimes the creative juices aren't flowing. Sometimes the planets are not aligned. Sometimes we find that we are missing a critical piece of information or that we have the wrong people in the room. Sometimes we just need a little fresh air.

It makes no sense to beat our heads against the creative wall until we bleed. Know when to take a break and walk away from the challenge. If your deadlines are very tight, the time away will need to be more limited, but take the break you need. You'll be amazed at how differently we look at our challenges after a little time away.

Well gang, that's all the brainstorming advice I can offer in the space of one column. I hope these thoughts will help you and your creative partners to reach further and discover more in your quest for great ideas.

Until next time, stay inspired.

BK

