



# How to Lead Brainstorming Sessions Effectively – Part I

## BEFORE THE BRAINSTORMING SESSION

1. Clearly identify and state the problem or issue to be addressed.
2. Decide whether brainstorming is the right way to identify potential solutions.
  - How to tell: Asking people to brainstorm implies that their efforts will be valued, and their ideas used. If a likely solution has been defined already, or if your organization is not open to new ideas for a project, brainstorming is not the right choice.
3. Define the goals you need to achieve in your brainstorming session and in your follow-up session.
4. Choose participants thoughtfully; include at least some who will be implementing the solutions.
  - Consider: Do you need to include your entire team? Managers or other leaders? (if leaders attend, an option for submitting ideas in writing can help avoid tension) Do you need people with specialized knowledge? Limit group size by inviting only those critical to the brainstorming session, and try to omit individuals you feel are likely to inhibit or impede the effort. Do select diverse participants (from other teams, departments, organizational levels, areas of expertise, etc.) who can contribute varied perspectives and knowledge.
5. Select a meeting place that will enable you to minimize distractions.
6. Communicate with participants in advance to explain the problem/issue to be solved, goals, expected outcomes, and schedules (set the time for your follow-up meeting now, too, if you want team members' commitment to both sessions).
  - Option: Many leaders ask participants to think about the problem in advance and bring their ideas—these can help you create momentum quickly once the session begins.



## How to Lead Brainstorming Sessions Effectively – Part II

### CONDUCTING THE BRAINSTORMING SESSION

1. Direct the seating—separating familiar colleagues can boost creativity.
2. Provide information on restroom locations, breaks, projected completion time, availability of water, snacks, etc.
3. State the ground rules: time limits for speaking, all ideas are welcome - no critiques or criticisms (be prepared to repeat this one), how to request the floor, etc.
4. Appoint an individual to act as timekeeper; provide a clock, watch, or other device.
5. Appoint an individual to take notes; provide a whiteboard, flipchart, or other means (low-tech approaches that enable ideas to be posted and visible tend to work well). Record the session to capture details.
6. Break the ice with introductions.
7. Reiterate the goals and expected outcomes. Provide any additional information participants might need to understand the issue/problem.
8. Get started. If participants brought ideas, begin with those.
9. Keep things moving – Address any distractions or stumbling blocks promptly. Try these responses for commonly encountered challenges:
  - Language: Keep the session positive by paying attention to participants' language. Be vigilant for "yes, but..." which is likely to preface criticism (not allowed). Encourage "yes, and..." instead.
  - Participation: Manage those who try to dominate the conversation and those who don't contribute by taking control of the floor. Call on people randomly or go around the table asking for ideas from each person in turn.
  - Creativity: All ideas are welcome, but truly outlandish (or too staid) suggestions can derail creative energy. Pick an element of the suggestion that you can use to redirect the conversation. For example, brainstorming more effective training strategies elicits conducting workshops in Tahiti. Laughter disrupts the group, threatening progress. Try this response: "That's a creative idea, though not a viable option for us. But should we think about changing our training venues? Or trying mobile learning?"
  - Ideas simply stall out: Every group hits a wall at some point. When ideas dry up, become repetitive, or when people simply get bored, take a break. Revisiting a few existing suggestions and asking for further ideas based on those can help, too. If the group remains blocked, it may be time to end the session.
10. Close the brainstorming session by acknowledging contributions and, if appropriate, reminding participants of the follow-up or any next steps.



## How to Lead Brainstorming Sessions Effectively – Part III

### THE FOLLOW-UP SESSION

Follow-up is about identifying the most promising ideas to move toward implementation. Some leaders choose to evaluate ideas on their own, or they may recruit new teams or reconvene the original brainstorming group. Individually or collectively:

1. Review the problem/issue to be solved and the goals of the brainstorming session.
2. Review the list of ideas generated in the brainstorming session.
3. Delete duplicate suggestions and any options obviously impossible or inappropriate for your organization.
4. Evaluate the remaining ideas, adding further thoughts to flesh them out, and removing or deferring those that don't hold up. Some questions to ask:
  - Does this idea address the problem? Is it likely to solve the issue you've identified?
  - Potential cost: Can we afford to do this? What are the risks involved?
  - Resources required: Do we have the people, technology, know-how, time, or other means necessary to develop the idea?
  - Return on investment: If we do this, will the likely results be worth it? What will we gain?
  - Enthusiasm: Are we excited (or not) about developing this idea?
5. Rank the remaining ideas from most promising to least.
6. Determine next steps in development/implementation of the ideas (this may be beyond the scope of the group). Assign any actions for which group members will be responsible.