April 9, 2012

Why Most Brainstorming Sessions Are Useless

Natalie Peace

Building successful businesses based on integrity and generosity.

I confess, the prospect of gathering my team together for a group pow-wow to collectively generate new ideas and engage in problem-solving makes me feel all warm and fuzzy. **The problem is, traditional brainstorming sessions are rarely the best way to ensure innovation.**

Group work has been the norm across many industries for decades now, and schools have been placing students' desks in clusters to ingrain this group-think tendency at ever earlier ages. Individual offices and cubicles have given way to collaborative workspaces in many offices, especially where creative work is the stock-in-trade.

Intuitively, this all makes a great deal of sense to me. Take down the walls, those silly barriers. Let the people come together and build a better tomorrow, with each contributing their unique strengths to the conversation. *We're stronger together.* And to a large extent, I still believe all of this to be true.

However, there have been several studies done on the effectiveness of brainstorming, and the results are disappointing. Richard Wiseman burst more than a few bubbles with his book 59 Seconds: Think a Little, Change a Lot which exposed flaws in many of the beliefs we take for granted, such as the one about brainstorming being the being the best way to come up with great ideas:

"Over 50 years of research shows that people often reach irrational decisions in groups … and highly biased assessments of the situation... strong willed people who lead group discussions can pressurise others into conforming, self-censorship and create an illusion of unanimity."

He goes on to say that "people are more creative away from the crowd. It is a universal phenomenon emerging in work across the world, including America, India, Thailand and Japan. In short – for seventy years, people have been using brainstorming to stifle--not stimulate their creative juices."

Ouch.

Does this mean we need to scrap the practice of brainstorming altogether? I would emphatically say no, but that might be because my idea of a brainstorming session involves a lot of good food and rousing debates about the latest episode of 'The Shark Tank'. And truly, I still believe there's a lot of value in spitballing ideas and taking a collaborative approach to many aspects of business. But there are a few ground rules I like to follow to make sure my brainstorming sessions are actually effective:

- Provide strong leadership and a framework to follow. Keeping it free-flowing and without rules might sound good, but that is what allows the loudest voices in the room to hold court and squeeze out those who are shy, that may have brilliant ideas which never get heard. (For

excellent examples of this principle at work, watch any episode of 'The Celebrity Apprentice'.)

- Give everyone time to themselves to think, and then come together with ideas to share. Introverts typically need time alone to get their creative juices flowing, and given the chance, they often come up with amazing solutions on their own (whereas extroverts may actually be more creative by feeding on the energy of a group).
- Make it mandatory for everyone to contribute ideas. There shouldn't be any effort to shoot down ideas initially--create a safe space to share before everyone starts thinking critically.
- Make it a rule that if you are going to shoot down an idea, you need to come up with an alternative.
- Consider using Edward de Bono's 'Six Thinking Hats' technique. Direct your team to put on each of the following hats to analyze the situation:
  - White hat - look at the facts themselves, gather as much data as possible.
  - Yellow hat - look at the positives, value and benefits.
  - **Black hat** - look at the negatives, difficulties and dangers.
  - Red hat - use feelings, hunches and intuition.
  - Green hat - use creative approaches to consider new concepts and alternatives.
  - Blue hat - facilitate the meeting, oversee the brainstorming process, and review the ideas generated. This hat is typically worn by the group leader, while the other hats can be delegated to particular team members, shared or taken turns with.

Whatever methods and rules you put in place, just be deliberate about them and always consider what kind of workplace you're creating. It's amazing how many leaders are willing to make assumptions about what works, or just keep doing what they've done before even if it hasn't proven particularly effective.