



# 10 Guidelines for Effective Brainstorming

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Creativity can be taught, nurtured, and enhanced. It does not belong solely to the artist among us, and certainly is not genetically limited to the gifted.

## LIVE BRAINSTORMING SESSIONS

Every organization uses it. Every manager, board member, director, volunteer, participant or member has played a part in it at least once a year. We are talking brainstorming sessions.

Personally, I have been in so many to the point that I plan my early exit strategy before we even begin. How many sessions have you been into that you can consider effective?

Brainstorming is a powerful tool, if used correctly, can enhance any decision a manager is ready to take. But just like any power tool, you must follow the instructions on how to put it together and use it, else you risk doing a bad job, or worse, harming yourself.

Take your mind back to the last brainstorming session you attended. What do you think was good about it? What did it lack? Did you contribute to it? Got something out of it?

In this article, I will put the spotlight on 10 guidelines to conduct a successful one, should you be in charge of facilitating the next brainstorming meeting.

## 1 COME PREPARED. AND INVITE OTHERS TO DO SO TOO.

If you notify all the participants 2 days in advance of the purpose of your session, and ask them to come ready with one or two ideas, you will have a head-start. People won't take those precious first awkward moments to set their inner moods.

## 2 INVITE OTHERS TO THE PARTY.

Yes the team members are the only ones concerned with the longer working hours, but if you invite people from other departments, participants, board members, or customers, you might be surprised at what they can bring to the table. Maybe your colleague has access to technology that will cut the time you write your report in half, your participant has extra free hours to volunteer with clean-up, or your partner organization has the contacts you need to slash costs in half. Throw in some munchies and drinks to feed the tummies as you drain the brains.

## 3 THINK AND RE-THINK THE REAL ISSUE.

Tackle the problem, not the symptoms. Re-writing that question or issue will open new lines of thoughts and increase the quality of the ideas. For example, if the session's title is: "How can we involve board members in fundraising", a new personal statement – such as "How can we make the board member be involved in a particular program" – will add new dimensions to your ideas. Play with the statement for a while before settling on just one to start the session.

In a previous workshop I conducted in creative thinking, the group stated that a problem they faced in their daily work was lack of mental stimulation. I asked them to state the question once, and then change the verb each time. Following are some of the results:

Q1: In what ways can we occupy our minds while we do the dull task?

Q2: In what ways can we get more knowledge to enhance the task?

Q3: In what ways can we become more interested?

Q4: In what ways can we make our work more exciting?

Q5: In what ways can we engage ourselves?

Each question will require a different thinking mode, resulting in multi-leveled solutions for the same problem.

## 4 RECORD AS YOU GO.

Don't forget a single word. Assign a note taker to write everything in front of everyone. This will give you the extra benefit of enhancing each others' ideas. Don't forget to give that person a chance to contribute as well.

## 5 DEFER JUDGMENT.

Imagine a pearl diver, plunging in the middle of the sea to collect one oyster, swim back to surface, straight to shore and open his find, only to find nothing. Then he will put on his suit again, paddle back for a second one.

*THAT is exactly what you do when you stop at each idea to evaluate it.*

In one of the sessions I attended, 3 out of 5 suggestions I proposed were rejected on the spot by the facilitator, “We don’t have enough money for that”, or “We cannot designate a worker for this idea”. Not only was I put off – and in so refused to participate anymore—the group lost the opportunity to enhance those “weird” ideas to better fit the need. Other members didn’t propose any ideas out of fear of being rejected and the talk remained between the facilitator and director.

A brainstorming is just this: storming! In a real climate storm, you don’t stop running to asses the damage. You keep running until you reach a safety, a dead-end or your time runs up. But unlike a real weather condition, you have options in this room-temperature setting: you can re-state the problem to open a new stream of thoughts, or schedule another session to follow up.

Jot down everything! and then search for your treasure among those ideas.

## 6 BECOME A GENERATOR MACHINE.

Never, NEVER, stop when you feel you have reached a suitable or good solution. You risk loosing a better one that might come in the next 4 minutes. Keep moving, with new fresh ideas or enhancing previous ones when you run out of juice (or coffee). Radical and crazy ideas must not be confined in your brain cells. Get them all out on the table—and blackboard—as well.

In a non-profit that ran a small video store, a crazy idea came in our brainstorming session of how to increase revenue, was to rent movies free of charge. Thankfully, that idea was not rejected, but worked with as is. The store decided to test it.

In a corner, a TV was set with lots of carpet space. It showed movies for free but sold popcorns, drinks, pizzas, and cushions. Soon sales took off and they learned something new. Now they rent the movies (for money) but provide a tested menu to order with every rented movie depending on its type (horror, comedy, drama...), and it worked!

Set a timer (one hour) and continue to storm it.

## 7 FORCE LARGE QUOTAS.

Don't stop because time ran out. Type the written ideas and send them to the same team and include others who didn't attend the session. Ask each to add 2 more ideas to reach the 100 quota before moving to the next step of evaluating them. Ask them to add to the already written ideas as well.

## 8 ELABORATE AND IMPROVE.

Connect two or more ideas to create a combined one, modify a plan by looking at it from different angles, the workers', the participants', the sponsors', the board members', the funders', and other organizations' point of view.

## 9 ENHANCE VISUALS.

On your flip chart you write the words that describe the proposed solution, but that is not your only option. Use sketches (my favorite is the stick man), drawings, color coding, arrows, triangles, stars and crooked lines to connect the thoughts. You will appreciate the master piece once you're done and might consider framing it.

## 10 THREATEN YOURSELF.

Why not make everybody sit upright and tensed by suggesting more government cuts to your programs? Maybe your facility was closed and was forced out, or the know-it-all manger just quit and you must run the show with the little information you have.

You can envision your problem from a different perspective by suggesting a reaction to a problem that increases the adrenaline in many organizations dramatically.

For example: instead of stating "In what ways may we improve our fundraising efforts", try asking "In what ways could the government shift their strategies that would really harm us"? or "How can we work so bad that we loose all the current funding"?. Here you list all the mishaps you can do (have fun imagining) in order to think of new venues, then implement the opposite ideas. You will get a much real—straight from the heart—ideas using this tool.



**So there you are, set and ready for your upcoming brainstorming session.  
But just before you leave, let's have a small exercise and answer the following:**

“How many uses can you find for a paper clip?” Or “What are all the things a paper clip can be?”

Set the timer to 10 minutes, and send your complete list to [myarabicstory@yahoo.ca](mailto:myarabicstory@yahoo.ca).

I will compile them all and send them back to you in one month. 🌐



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Randah Taher is a project developer and consultant who worked in Montreal for 7 years before moving to Toronto, Canada, where she currently resides. She works with learning, non-profit organizations, and social enterprises, and is involved in projects concerning youth, education, and community revitalization. She consults and trains groups in creative problem solving tools, innovative strategic management, restructuring and program development. Randah is the founder of [My Arabic Story](#), a cultural hub with worldwide volunteers, which narrates folktales by storytelling, doing puppet shows, and recording CDs. Find more at [Contagious Creativity](#) or email [myarabicstory@yahoo.ca](mailto:myarabicstory@yahoo.ca)

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