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WHY TRADITIONAL BRAINSTORMING DOESN'T PRODUCE BREAKTHROUGHS



BIG IDEA In A Few Words

Organizational leaders face the recurring challenge of needing new ideas to jumpstart projects, upgrade ministries or address underperforming initiatives. Higher stakes bring greater pressure. For years the default approach for generating new ideas has been traditional brainstorming in the absence of critical reflection. But traditional brainstorming doesn't work. Research shows criticism leads to more and better ideas by encouraging participants to fully engage with the work of others. Dissent, even when it is wrong, can improve creativity by activating the power of surprise. Focused thinking exercises are good for solving analytical problems but relaxing activities are better for creative breakthroughs.

In the business world Procter & Gamble has a well documented record of innovative products and breakthrough ideas. And for good reason. They are heavily invested in research and development and have historically employed more scientists than any other company in the world, including more PhDs than the faculties of MIT, UC-Berkley and Harvard combined.

So it was counterintuitive for P & G to outsource product innovation and a reflection



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of how desperate they were to stay on the leading edge of the household-cleaning market. Henry West, a member of the creative team with the outside firm said, “I think P & G came to us because their scientists were telling them to give up...they told us to think crazy, to try to come up with something that all those chemists couldn’t.”⁵⁰

The biggest difference between the insider scientists and the outsourced firm was perspective. The chemists began with chemicals and focused on a better cleaning product. The outsourced creative team began with customers and focused on a better way to clean. That’s no small difference.

At the time the floor cleaning instruments used in nearly every household were a broom and a mop. The team became convinced the answer wasn’t a better cleaning product but a better cleaning instrument. They were not after better soap but a replacement for the mop. The product they developed was internally described as “tissue on a stick” but you would recognize it as the Swiffer, which generated \$500 million in sales in its first year and has made the household mop obsolete.

Every organizational leader has faced the challenge of needing a new idea to jumpstart a project, upgrade a ministry or address underperforming initiatives. The higher the stakes the greater the pressure. And for years the default approach to innovation has been a brainstorming session. The only problem is traditional brainstorming doesn’t work.

The Birth of Brainstorming and the Power of Dissent

The group creativity exercise of brainstorming was developed in the 1940s by Alex Osborn, who went on to write a series of bestselling books on the topic. Osborn preached that brainstorming could double the creative output of a group if conducted correctly. The most important principle of a brainstorming session, according to Osborn, is the absence of criticism. The premise seems logical enough: if people are concerned about their ideas being rejected they won’t share them freely.

How this premise could go unchallenged for so long is hard to explain, especially when decades of research has proven brainstorming groups think of far fewer ideas than the same number of people

working individually who later meet to simply collate their input. In fact, the first empirical test of Osborn's premise was conducted in 1958 at Yale University. Forty-eight undergraduate students were divided into twelve groups and given a series of creative puzzles to solve. They were instructed to carefully follow the group creativity guidelines developed by Alex Osborn.

A control group of forty-eight students working individually were given the same puzzles. A panel of judges was then asked to evaluate the ideas produced by the brainstorming groups compared to the aggregated list from the students working alone. Not only did the forty-eight individuals produce twice as many ideas, they were also perceived to be more feasible and effective in the eyes of the judges.

Further research conducted by UC-Berkeley psychologist Charlan Nemeth, helps us understand why traditional brainstorming actually stifles good ideas. She divided two-hundred sixty-five students into groups of five to form teams. Each team was given the same difficult problem and given twenty minutes to generate as many solutions as possible. The teams were randomly assigned to one of three different sets of conditions. Some groups were given no additional instructions at all. Some groups were given the standard brainstorming guidelines and the final third were told the best way to come up with solutions was to combine freewheeling association with debate, even criticizing each other's ideas.

The results of the experiment showed the brainstorming groups outperformed the groups with no instructions but only by a little. But the people in the debate oriented groups generated twenty-five percent more ideas. An additional but important finding came after the experiment. When asked later if they had any additional ideas surface the students in the debate groups generated three times more ideas than the students in the other groups.

Charlan Nemeth asserts that criticism leads to more new ideas because it encourages participants to fully engage with the work of others. We think about the ideas they present because we want to improve them. The imperfection of the ideas presented is what gets us to really listen. Criticism is an important part of the creative process because the obvious answer doesn't have to be the only answer.

Nemeth demonstrated this with another experiment. She convened a group of students who were shown a series of color slides and asked to identify the colors. The group settled in to a rather boring routine. But in some of the groups her lab assistant, posing as another student, would shout out the wrong answer, calling a red slide pink or a blue slide turquoise. After the color slide exercise the groups were asked to engage in an association exercise on the colors they had seen. The groups in the dissent condition who heard incorrect colors called out by the lab assistant produced many more original and varied associations. The color blue wasn't merely associated with sky but with Miles Davis, Smurfs and berry pie. Her experiment showed dissent, even when it is wrong, can improve creativity because it activates the power of surprise.

Take a Walk...Have an Idea

Brain science research has documented that an essential aspect of creativity is a steady rhythm of alpha waves emanating from the right hemisphere. While there is much we don't understand about alpha waves, we do know they are connected with relaxing activities, like taking a walk or a warm shower. Yes, there is a scientific explanation for why we get ideas in a warm shower. Alpha waves direct our attention toward the stream of remote associations, which emanate from the right hemisphere. Focused thinking, which often is associated with brainstorming, directs our thoughts toward the details of the problems we are trying to solve. That's fine if the problem needs to be solved analytically but it undermines creativity.

This topic intrigues me because I believe the Great Commission community in North America has a growing recognition of our need for breakthrough ideas but a modest track record at producing them.⁵¹ And if we are going to fulfill God's purposes at this moment in history we will need a burst of Holy Spirit induced creativity along with a sense of urgency. So let me offer an alternative approach to traditional brainstorming.

Make Idea Generation a Normal Part of Your Workflow Agenda

Don't wait until your back is against the wall with a pressing deadline to look for creative input. Block out time on a regular basis where you can engage in activities that are conducive for alpha wave production. Long before Google popularized the idea of allowing employees to invest company time working on

new projects, 3M had already embraced what they describe as bootlegging, which encourages their staff to spend up to fifteen percent of their day pursuing speculative new ideas. They also have a flexible attention policy, which encourages alpha wave inducing activities. If you are stuck or struggling to solve a problem, take a walk, stare out the window, or play a game of pinball. These companies demand a high level of productivity and hold workers accountable for results. But they understand they will be more productive if they are more creative.

Combine Individual Reflection with Group Interaction

When you need a new idea, frame the question for your team a few weeks in advance of any meeting and encourage them to marinate on it when their right brain is active. Research shows one of the best times to do this is right after you wake up in the morning, before you even get out of bed or on an early morning walk. Ask everyone to write down their ideas and revisit them a few times for critical reflection. Then call a meeting where each person can share his/her ideas in an environment that includes healthy debate.

Get Intentional About Cognitive Diversity

The highest level of objectivity will come from an outsider who is not constrained by the assumptions of insider group think. Some of the challenges we are facing will simply not be solved by us. They will be solved by people who share our passions but not our perspective. The problem is the more difficult the issue the less likely we are to involve outsiders in exploring a solution.

Here are a few questions for consideration. What is the track record of your organization when it comes to innovation? How often do you utilize traditional brainstorming sessions and when was the last time it produced a breakthrough idea? What is keeping you from engaging in healthy debate that includes outsiders who provide cognitive diversity?

NOTES

⁵⁰ Jonah Lerher, *IMAGINE: How Creativity Works*, (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012) Kindle location 52

⁵¹ This was one of the key findings of the RESET Dialogue Tour conducted the summer before the 2011 North American Mission Leaders Conference.

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