How to brainstorm brilliant ideas in teams without sliding into 'groupthink'

13 May 2022, by Sabrina Habib

Creativity has many definitions. Most mention originality and problem-solving.

Renowned psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi may have said it best when he characterized creativity in the workplace as having an idea that is recognized by other experts in the field and the general public as something new.

In my research, I explore the creative process in the context of higher education, advertising and leadership.

In 2019, I created a course at the University of South Carolina called Creative Thinking & Problem Solving to help college students thrive in the workplace where most problems won't have an exact answer and they won't have study guides or feedback from teachers. I've observed that after a lifetime of filling in bubbles on multiple choice tests, some students can find working in gray areas where any solution seems possible intimidating.

The creative process

And yet after graduating, most of my students will be looking at job descriptions that mention creativity, one of the most desirable soft skills.

The corporate trend toward group problem-solving dates back some eight decades. Advertising executive and business guru Alex Osborn coined the term "brainstorm," which he described in his 1948 book "Your Creative Power" as "using the brain to storm a creative problem—and doing so in commando fashion, with each stormer attacking the same objective." His goal was quantity: 10 of his employees once produced 87 ideas for an ad campaign in just 90 minutes.

Although brainstorming in teams can help coworkers bond, debate and exchange ideas, its effectiveness has been questioned by researchers in recent years. Many organizations continue to use
the process. Having their ideas recognized publicly puts people in the limelight, making them vulnerable to criticism. A lack of confidence can also challenge creative thinking.

Many resources have emerged offering strategies for building individual creative confidence. They include embracing failure, playing games and overcoming the fear of being judged.

The challenge of brainstorming in teams

Since individuals see problems from different perspectives, research shows that groups with diverse disciplines, backgrounds, beliefs, knowledge and skills produce the strongest, most unique results. Brainstorming among people with different kinds of expertise holds individuals accountable for contributing suggestions from their specific domain.

Successful group work requires focus. My research shows its important to carefully define the challenge, task or problem. That includes amassing key data and outlining boundaries, like time frame, budget, available resources, technology and any other constraints. Launching in this way helps a team select the best idea generated by its collaboration.

The perfect storm

Nurturing group creativity requires an environment that encourages risk-taking, constructive criticism and teamwork. Creating a culture that is conducive to creativity has to be done intentionally in ways that counter personal fears of rejection and tendencies to self-censor or criticize. People should be empowered to speak up.

Establishing three key guidelines is essential:

1. Focus on the quantity of ideas generated, not their quality.
2. Avoid criticism, judgment or defense of ideas during the brainstorming period.
3. Don't place limits on "wild" ideas, no matter how bad, outrageous or impractical they seem, recognizing that every idea is worth expressing.

Beyond groupthink

Brainstorming sessions can be more productive if participants do some independent work first.

In a group, this can be done simultaneously over minutes or even days, with team members writing down their ideas individually then sharing with the group later. This process, known as divergent thinking, can also be done virtually through collaborative websites like miro, mural and figma. Working individually ensures everyone will bring ideas and everyone's voice will be heard.

Next comes "convergent thinking." The group evaluates proposals to identify the best innovation or solution to the problem at hand. Building on someone else's idea is encouraged.

There are many other approaches to group brainstorming, such as "design thinking," in which quick brainstorming sessions lead to tangible prototypes. The "six thinking hats" method has group members focusing on each aspect of proposed idea at a time. For example, they will discuss negative aspects, then positive, feelings, risks, and possibilities for each solution.

While brainstorming may sometimes be an arduous process, it promotes the buy-in of ideas and team bonding. And it's important to remember that within a space where everyone feels free to express themselves, good ideas can come from anyone.

This article is republished from The Conversation under a Creative Commons license. Read the original article.

Provided by The Conversation