

Important brainstorming rules

By Rafikul Islam

ORGANISATIONAL decision makers function under increasingly uncertain conditions as organisation environments are becoming more dynamic and complex.

The dynamicity coupled with complexity has necessitated making decisions in a group. The straightforward reason for using groups in making decisions is that a group of knowledgeable individuals with diverse managerial and technical expertise is more likely to make effective decisions than a lone individual.

How to make decisions in a group? The common answer is brainstorming. But in reality, the term has been wrongly used in numerous situations. When we invite a group of people in a meeting room and deliberate certain issue, we call it as brainstorming session. But it is not.

When we fail to make a decision in that interacting group, we say that brainstorming session has been failed.

To call the meeting as a brainstorming session, a number of rules must be followed:

1) Choose an able facilitator:

There must be a facilitator for the entire session. Much of the success of a brainstorming session depends on how he/she conducts it.

After formal opening of the session, this person is expected to state the issue in a clear-cut manner. It is very important to remind the participants about the operating rules of the session and the participants must abide by these rules.

2) Select a balanced team: The team should comprise between five and 12 people. The objective is to generate a large number of ideas pertaining to some issues, and if the number of participants is less than five, then that objective may not be achieved well. On the other hand, if it goes beyond 12, then controlling the emotions of participants may be difficult and the session may exceed its time limit (a maximum of 90 minutes).

3) Stay on the core issue: There is ample chance that a brainstorming session digresses from its actual issue. The participants must be mindful that there is one and only one issue for the session and by all means they are required to be focused on that.

4) Stress quantity over quality: Participants are strongly encouraged to generate as many ideas on the issue as possible. Encouraging quantity forces those with agendas to think beyond their pet ideas.

Alex Osborne, the originator of the technique put this rule as "the wilder the ideas the better".

If you look for quality ideas, then perhaps not many ideas will be generated. The rationale for observing this rule is: the larger the number of ideas produced, the greater is the possibility of achieving an effective solution.

5) Suspend evaluation: Many people in meetings are worried about the quality of their ideas and they think that their ideas will not be accepted favourably, and consequently their participation in the discussion remains minimal. This is against the core principles of brainstorming.

To encourage free flow of ideas, the participants are not allowed to evaluate others' ideas. If someone thinks that some participant's idea is not good enough, then he/she may not select that in the voting stage later.

In fact, all the inferior ideas will

be dropped when voting is completed. All the participants are encouraged to share their ideas whatever these are in total confidence that there will be no criticism at all on their ideas.

6) Ignore seniority and keep the ideas anonymous: There is no status difference among participants. The ideas are generated collectively and nobody owns any of the ideas, not even the originator. All the ideas are to be treated equally, no matter who proposed these.

7) Ensure balanced participation: Virtually every meeting is dominated by certain individuals and they talk most of the time and they try to impose their own ideas on the majority. If this is the case, then it is not a brainstorming session. The facilitator should tell them that "We've listened from you, now let's see what others tell".

8) Don't set any limit: Once again, people should be allowed to share anything that they deem relevant to the issue. When an idea is presented, apparently it might seem silly, but nobody should laugh or ridicule, otherwise it will inhibit the free flow of ideas and the creativity of

the individuals within the group will be lost. Furthermore, an apparently not-so-good idea can stimulate others to generate better ideas.

9) Modify and combine ideas: It is possible that two ideas which are already articulated, be modified and combined. This will be treated as a new idea. Osborne called this as "hitch-hiking".

10) Record every idea: Since the number of ideas in a typical brainstorming session is large, it will be difficult to remember all of them if they are not written down.

Furthermore, the recorded ideas should be visible to all participants. This will facilitate them in choosing the better ideas at a later stage.

Besides generating ideas, brainstorming sessions involve employees in the decision-making process. This helps increase their job satisfaction because employees feel like part of a team.

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