



Brainstorming

What is it?

A method used to generate a large quantity of ideas in a short time. In addition to the Classic Brainstorming process most are familiar with, two other variations are described:

- ◆ Round Robin Brainstorming
- ◆ Sticky note Brainstorming

Unlike the silent [Affinity Technique](#), all three Brainstorming approaches described here are designed for interaction between team members.

How do I use it?

- ❶ As a group, explore the issue or problem for which ideas are needed. Ask those with knowledge of the issue questions such as Who, What, When, Where, Why & How. Write a "**How can we...**" question.



Refer to [Issue Exploration](#) in [Chapter 2: Making Sense](#) for more on this step.

- ❷ Clarify [roles](#) and [ground rules](#). Identify the team's Sponsor, i.e., the person with the issue to be addressed by the team. Select participants based upon their expertise, diversity and willingness to think flexibly. For brainstorming [ground rules](#), see page 199.
- ❸ Generate ideas. Several brainstorming methods are described below.

Classic Brainstorming—In this well-known approach, members call out ideas as they come, while a scribe publicly records these ideas on flipchart paper. In some cases, two scribes are used to speed the flow and recording of ideas.

This method usually results in the generation of large numbers of ideas, and it encourages participants to "piggy back", or build on one another's ideas.

Sticky Brainstorming—One of the drawbacks of Classic Brainstorming is the difficulty inherent in working with lists (of potentially hundreds) of ideas recorded on flipchart paper.

To address this, Sticky Brainstorming is a variation that works as follows:

- ◆ Have the scribe *write ideas onto sticky notes as they are called out*, rather than writing on flipchart paper directly.
- ◆ Once an idea is written onto a sticky note, the facilitator posts the note on the flipchart.



HINT: The use of sticky notes makes it easier later in the process to categorize and work with the ideas. Sticky notes should be at least 3"x5".

Sticky Brainstorming is different than the [Affinity Technique](#), in which members write ideas onto sticky notes in silence.

This variation still has participants **CALL OUT** their ideas, to encourage building off one another. The only change is in the way they are recorded.



A potential drawback to Sticky Brainstorming is that if the scribe cannot keep up, ideas may not flow as quickly as in Classic Brainstorming.

To address this you can make each participant a scribe. Each person writes their own ideas on sticky notes and then hands them to the facilitator to be stated aloud and posted.

This creates its own problem, however, since participants tend not to listen to others ideas while writing down their own. Every solution creates its own problems.

Round Robin Brainstorming—Another potential drawback of Classic Brainstorming is the possibility that members will not participate equally, i.e., some members will be more reserved in calling out their ideas than others.

To minimize the likelihood of this occurring, another variation on the Classic Brainstorming method is to have participants call out their ideas in a defined sequence, usually going around the table.

Members can "Pass" if they do not have an idea. A drawback to this method is that ideas do not tend to flow as freely as with Classic Brainstorming.



HINT: The best approach for you may be another variation or some combination of the above methods.

For example, you might start with Sticky Brainstorming and one scribe.

If things are moving too slowly, let everyone scribe on sticky notes.

If participation is unequal, switch to Round Robin on sticky notes for a while.

④ Regardless of the method used to generate ideas, you will experience several stages to the generation process.

- ◆ At first, familiar ideas come out, rapid fire.
- ◆ Then things slow down.
- ◆ You have reached the first "stuck" point.

As a facilitator, expect several of these "stuck" points and be prepared to help the team work through them. Some hints for working through "stuck points" follow.

"Stuck Point"	Facilitator might say...
#1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☛ "Are there any other ways to look at this that we haven't considered yet?"
#2	Select a promising idea and say: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☛ "Let's build on this."
#3	Prompt with questions based on SCAMMPERR <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☛ "Can we Substitute something?" ☛ "What if we Reversed things?" etc.
#4	Check your time. Have you got enough ideas? Brainstorming for 10-20 minutes is usually enough. If you need more ideas, do another session later, or shift to a different method for Getting "Unstuck".

⑤ When you have finished generating ideas, you will usually want to review, organize and/or **categorize them before evaluating** and selecting the best.

If you have used sticky notes, it is relatively simple to group the ideas into 6-12 logical clusters. If not, you can:

- Review the list of ideas and create names for 6-12 categories.
- Code these category names, i.e., 1-12 or A-K.
- Label each sticky note or idea written on a flipchart using these category codes.

As part of the categorization process, discuss and clarify ideas. Since they were generated and recorded rapid fire, without explanation, it may be necessary to explain some of them.

Do not allow this clarification to digress into either commercials for, or criticism of individual ideas. Evaluation comes later. For now, just make sure everyone understands the ideas.

You may also eliminate some duplicates at this stage, or tweak the wording of similar ideas, to emphasize the differences between them.



QUOTE: "You'll look up and down streets.
Look 'em over with care. About some you
will say, 'I don't choose to go there.'" --
Theodore "Dr. Seuss" Geisel

- ⑥ Now you are ready to **evaluate and select the best ideas**. There are many options for doing so. The simplest is to let the Sponsor pick his/her favorites. While doing so, you might give team members an opportunity to make a 30-second "pitch" for ideas that aren't selected, but the Sponsor still decides.

Other methods for prioritizing ideas are summarized below.

POINTER: [Chapter 5](#): Making Decisions includes methods such as [Multi-voting](#) to determine a team's favorites, [Impact-Ease Grid](#) to distinguish short-from long-term ideas or actions. Also refer to [Upgrading IDEAs](#) in this chapter to stratify and refine ideas with potential.



- ⑦ Take action. Ideas are useless unless *somebody does something* about them.



QUOTE: "All worthwhile men have good thoughts, good ideas and good intentions-- but precious few of them ever translate those into action." -- John Hancock Field