



COOPERATIVE EXTENSION

Bringing the University to You

Fact Sheet 03-09

Anonymous Brainstorming Technique

Marlene Rebori, Area Specialist
Community and Organizational Development

Michael Havercamp, State Specialist
Group Facilitation and Mediation

Groups often struggle to find collaborative structured processes for generating ideas and solutions to problems, issues, and concerns. This fact sheet describes the Anonymous Brainstorming Technique (Bens 2000), a technique that can be used to assist groups as they manage various ideas when engaged in planning and problem-solving.

What is it? It is a mind-expanding and creative brainstorming technique for generating, sharing, and discussing participant ideas about a topic in a group setting while allowing for anonymity.

When should it be used? This is a technique to assist groups who are challenged to generate a number of ideas in a relatively short time period or when a topic is sensitive, requiring anonymous input from group participants. The technique can be employed when groups find themselves “stuck,” not able to find a solution after engaging in a lengthy discussion about an issue. Additionally, the technique is a helpful tool when group members are reluctant to speak in the presence of other members, or when there are individuals in a group who tend to dominate discussions.

What are the process steps that should be followed when using the Anonymous Brainstorming Technique?

1. Select a facilitator (member or nongroup member), who serves as a “neutral” when conducting discussions using the Anonymous Brainstorming Technique.
2. Depending on the size of the group, participants are seated with no less than five and no more than eight persons at a table, a round table is preferred. Paper and marking instruments are placed near the center of the table.
3. The facilitator introduces a list of suggested ground rules (or “conversation principles”) to be followed. Following a discussion of the ground rules, participants are asked to honor them. Two important rules or principles include: (a) all ideas count, even the “crazy” ones; and (b) “arguments” are not allowed.
4. Identify a topic, issue or question requiring the generation of ideas. The facilitator writes the question so all participants can see and read it. For example, “*How can we reduce traffic congestion at the corner of Mulberry and Main Street?*” or “*What can we do about traffic congestion in the northwest corner of town?*”

5. Each person receives at least three slips of blank paper (“Issue Sheets”). A time limit is set (approximately five minutes). Participants work alone and write as briefly as possible on the blank paper a response to the specific question or issue.
6. At the completion of the given time limit, participants are asked to fold their Issue Sheets and place them in the center of the table. (*Sheets do not have names on them.*)
7. A volunteer in each group shuffles the Sheets, then the volunteer distributes to other participants the same number of Sheets completed by each participant. If someone receives a Sheet that he or she prepared, then the Sheet is returned and that participant receives another one.
8. Now, participants are offered the opportunity to place written comments on the Issue Sheet(s) they received. Comments might include a question or need for clarification. Remember: during brainstorming, participants are not permitted to *evaluate* ideas.
9. Continue the process described in step 7 until all participants have commented on each Issue Sheet. In this manner every participant has had a chance to read each Sheet and anonymously comment on them.
10. When participants have finished reviewing all Sheets, the facilitator asks the group to read the material written on the Sheets. Comments are recorded on a wallboard, flip chart, or sticky wall (www.ica-usa.org).
11. Posted comments are discussed by the entire group. Discussion may include grouping of similar ideas, themes, or next steps. Examples of possible next steps might include prioritizing ideas or

developing an action plan. Some suggestions may include:

- *Do the grouped ideas lend themselves to a plan of action or strategies for the group?* The group may want to prioritize the categories at this time and begin working on an action strategy.
- *Do the ideas listed add clarity to the issue, creating a better understanding of the group member’s opinions?* Once the issue becomes understandable, group members may see clearly what the next step would entail.

Resources

Bens, Ingrid. 2000. Facilitating with Ease! San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, Publishers.

Havergal, Maggie & Edmonstone, John. 2001. The Facilitator’s Toolkit. England, UK: Gower Publishing, Ltd.

Kaner, Sam. 1996. Facilitator’s Guide to Participatory Decision-Making. Gabriola Island, BC., Canada: New Society Publishers. (Published in Cooperation with COMMUNITY AT WORK).

Moore, Carl M. 1990. Group Techniques for Idea Building: Applied Social Research Methods Series. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications Volume 9.

Schwartz, Roger. 1994. The Skilled Facilitator. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Sticky Wall. The Institute of Cultural Affairs, Phoenix, AZ. [http:// www.ica-usa.org](http://www.ica-usa.org)

Vrooman, Rona. 1997. Group Process Tools. Info-line. Alexandria, VA: American Society for Training and Development. Issue Number 9407

The University of Nevada, Reno is an Equal Opportunity/ Affirmative Action employer and does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, age, creed, national origin, veteran status, physical or mental disability, or sexual orientation, in any program or activity it operates. The University of Nevada employs only United States citizens and aliens lawfully authorized to work in the United States