BRAINSTORMING
THE THEORY AND TECHNIQUE
OF SUSPENDED JUDGMENT

- The Cost of Premature Criticism
- Suspended Judgment
- Ground Rules for Brainstorming
- Facilitator’s Do’s and Don’ts for Brainstorming
- The Many Uses of Brainstorming
THE COST OF PREMATURE CRITICISM

Rough-draft thinking is just like rough-draft writing – it needs encouragement, not evaluation. Many people don’t understand this – if they notice a flaw in someone’s thinking, they point it out. They think they've been helpful. But rough-draft ideas need to be clarified, researched, and modified before being subjected to critical evaluation. The timing of critical evaluation can make the difference between the life and death of a new idea.

EXAMPLE

A small but growing law firm was looking for office space. The firm's administrator researched the possibilities, then offered a proposal: "I found 8,000 square feet on the north side of town for $10,000 per month for a one-year lease. The owner will lower the rent to $8,000 if we sign a five-year lease. We could offset our rent by subletting to the current tenant. The north side isn't great at night, but it's near public transportation and has plenty of parking. I think we should seriously consider this location." This was a fully-developed proposal, ready to be critiqued. If it contained any flaws, now was the time to find them.

However, several months earlier, the group had shot down the administrator's initial proposal. "Since larger spaces are cheaper," the administrator had said, "what if we rented a big office and sublet some of it?" Someone responded, "Forget it, we don't have time or energy to find people to sublet." Someone else said, "I don't want to be responsible for too much space. After all, every landlord in town will make us sign a five-year lease – we could really get stuck."

Note that these quick reactions were based on erroneous assumptions. It did not require much effort to find a sublet, and the firm did not have to sign a five-year lease. Nonetheless, some participants were so quick to criticize the administrator's thinking that they killed the idea before the group had a chance to develop it. After the first discussion, the administrator stopped looking for places that required sublets. But six months later, after looking and looking for a smaller office at a good rent, he remembered his original idea and pursued it.

Premature criticism is often inaccurate. And stifling. When ideas are criticized before they are fully formed, many people feel discouraged and stop trying. Furthermore, they may become unwilling to volunteer their rough-draft thinking at future meetings. They anticipate objections and keep quiet unless they can invent a counterargument. Thus, people learn to practice self-censorship. A group is then deprived of access to its most valuable natural resource: the creative thinking of its members.
SUSPENDED JUDGMENT
COMMON QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

1. How can I suspend my judgment if I truly do not agree with what someone else is saying?
Suspended judgment does not imply agreement; it implies tolerance. You don’t have to let go of anything – you’re just making room for other people to express their ideas.

2. What if I know that an idea won’t work?
Suspended judgment encourages people to use their creative imagination. This often produces impossible ideas. For example, “If we were all 20 feet tall we could save lots of gasoline by walking more.” You don’t have to believe an idea is true; just let yourself “try it on” and see what your imagination produces. After all, “if humans could fly” was a crazy idea until the twentieth century.

3. Isn’t collecting silly ideas a waste of time? Wouldn’t it be more efficient for us to focus on the realistic options?
Suspended judgment comes into play precisely when the so-called “realistic” options have all been found lacking. In other words, creative thinking is the most efficient use of a group’s time when nothing else works!

4. Doesn’t suspended judgment produce chaotic discussions that go off in a dozen directions?
Only if the process is handled poorly. To use suspended judgment effectively, the group should establish clear ground rules and a clear time limit. To paraphrase de Bono,* the more informality you want your group to achieve with the content of your thinking, the more structured formality you need in the process of your thinking.

5. If I suspend judgment of an idea I think is wrong, how will I get a chance to critique that idea?
Suspended judgment is temporary, not permanent. Most processes that call for suspended judgment are designed to last no more than thirty minutes. Suspended does not mean abandoned.

GROUND RULES FOR BRAINSTORMING*

1. Every contribution is worthwhile.
   • Even weird, way-out ideas
   • Even confusing ideas
   • Especially silly ideas

2. Suspend judgment.
   • We won’t evaluate each other’s ideas
   • We won’t censor our own ideas
   • We’ll save these ideas for later discussion

3. We can modify this process before it starts or after it ends, but not while it’s underway.

*The inventor of brainstorming as a technique for stimulating creativity was Alex Osborn. His classic, Applied Imagination, New York: Charles Scribner & Sons, 1953, has spawned more than one hundred variations of brainstorming.

When introducing the technique of formal brainstorming to a group, spend a little time discussing the value of suspended judgment. Then ask each participant if s/he is willing to follow these ground rules. If one or more members are not, encourage the group to modify the ground rules to fit the needs of all members.
Most groups use brainstorming for very limited purposes – generating solutions to a problem or creating new products. But brainstorming can be put to a much greater variety of uses. It can be used to help build lists of such things as:

- **New Goals**
- **Underlying Causes of a Problem**
- **Points of View Held by Persons Not in the Room**
- **Unexpressed Concerns**
- **Helpful People or Resources**
- **Ways to Build Teamwork**
- **New Directions of Inquiry**
- **Lessons from the Past**
- **Obstacles to Meeting a Goal**
- **Ways to Improve How a Meeting is Run**
- **Hidden Beliefs or Assumptions**
- **Sources of Inspiration**

Groups members' willingness to *suspend judgment* will probably free them to list ideas or perspectives they would not otherwise consider.
FACILITATOR TIPS FOR BRAINSTORMING

DO

• Do a lot of mirroring to keep things moving at a fast clip.

• Do encourage people to take turns.

• Do treat silly ideas the same as serious ideas.

• Do move around to create a lively feeling.

• Do say, “Let’s see if I’ve got it right so far” if a person is difficult to follow.

• Do repeat the purpose often: “Who else can explain why our office systems are so inefficient?”

• Do start a new flipchart page before the previous one is full.

• Do give a warning that the end is approaching.

• Do expect a second wind of creative ideas after the obvious ones are exhausted.

DON’T

• Don’t interrupt.

• Don’t say, “We’ve already got that one.”

• Don’t say, “Ooh, good one!”

• Don’t say, “Hey, you don’t really want me to write that one, do you?”

• Don’t favor the “best” thinkers.

• Don’t use frowns, raised eyebrows or other nonverbal gestures that signal disapproval.

• Don’t give up the first time the group seems stuck.

• Don’t simultaneously be the leader, the facilitator, and the chartwriter.

• Don’t start the process without clearly setting the time limit.

• Don’t rush or pressure the group. Silence usually means that people are thinking.