Brainstorming

Brainstorming was popularized in 1953 by Alex F. Osborn, but despite its longevity and popularity, it's often misunderstood and poorly executed. Thoughtfully facilitated, a brainstorming session can move a group from derailing criticism to generative collaboration.

Classic brainstorming has four rules:

1. **Go for quantity.** The purpose in harvesting a large number of ideas is to push past the obvious and think creatively. Quantity breeds quality: the more ideas there are, the greater the chance that one of them will be really good. Set a target goal (100 ideas) in a certain time period (60 minutes.)
2. **Withhold criticism.** Do not interrupt, critique, or question. Simply capture what's said. Create a space of safety to encourage everyone to share. Acknowledge, then move on to the next idea. Make space for quiet people by asking, "Can we hear from someone who hasn't shared yet?"
3. **Welcome wild ideas.** Wild ideas spark creativity. If an idea sounds ridiculous, challenge yourself to remain open and curious. Ask yourself questions like, "How might I adapt what I'm hearing? What ideas does this generate for me?" Think divergently. For now, abandon the typical constraints.
4. **Build on the ideas of others.** Use joining language: say "and" instead of "but." Do not only share new ideas. Use the idea that came before to conceive a new idea.

Since Osborn, several facilitators have added conditions for successful brainstorming.

- **Be visual.** Draw a quick icon on a sticky note to create a stronger mental model of your idea. Drawings convey ideas faster and more concretely than words. It doesn't have to be pretty! Use a [visual vocabulary](#) as a reference.
- **Stay focused.** Divergent thinking is fun, but try to stay focused on the topic, otherwise conversations can drift outside of scope.
- **One conversation at a time.** Wait a beat before sharing the next idea. Encourage active listening. Make space for more quiet team members.

In her book *Quiet*, Susan Cain lists three fallacies of brainstorming. Keep them in mind to avoid pitfalls which can result in shutting out both people and ideas. If you start to notice a fallacy, here are suggested solutions:

Fallacy	Solution
Social loafing: in a group, some individuals tend to sit back and let others do the work.	Use a round robin, serial share, or brainwriting, where participants share ideas in sequence.
Production blocking: only one person can talk or produce an idea at once, while the other group members are forced to sit passively.	Break the large group into smaller groups, pairs, or individuals. Task participants to generate ideas in their breakouts, then bring those ideas back to the large group. Harvest written sticky notes to encourage brevity.
Evaluation apprehension: the fear of looking stupid in front of one's peers.	Use ground rules and principles to set up a place of safety and respect. Harvest written sticky notes anonymously.