

Challenging the wisdom of the crowd: Value of Brainstorming in the Workplace

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Faculty of Arts

Olga Lioudvinevitch

ID 20418898

Honors Political Science / Arts and Business Co-op

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**CHALLENGING THE WISDOM OF THE CROWD:
VALUE OF BRAINSTORMING IN THE WORKPLACE**

TitanFile
151 Charles St. W. Kitchener ON

Prepared by
Olga Lioudvinevitch
ID 20418898
3A Political Science/Arts & Business Co-op
Department of Political Science
January 17, 2014

28 Tupper Court
Kitchener ON, Canada
N2B 2Y3

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Ms. Veronica Kitchen
Head of Department of Political Science
University of Waterloo, ON, Canada
N2L 3G1

Dear Ms. Kitchen:

This report - *Challenging the wisdom of the crowd: Value of brainstorming in business teams*, is my second work term report. My previous academic term was 2B. My most recent work term was spent with TitanFile Inc., a start-up company working in the information technology sector. Tony Abou-Assaleh was my direct supervisor and my job title was communications manager.

One of the duties I was assigned was note-taking during team meetings. This particular task inspired my report. The intent of this paper is to identify the best situations in which businesses should practice team brainstorming sessions. In the following report, I will cover three hypothetical scenarios for which brainstorming sessions are commonly held and evaluate their advantages and disadvantages as well as the extent to which they should be practiced in a business.

My research was primarily done online, though you will notice I will cite personal experience in some portions of the paper. My supervisor, Tony Abou-Assaleh, was gracious enough to give me notes on the subject from his personal experience as well.

I hereby state that this report was written entirely by me, and has not received any previous academic credit at this or any other institution.

Sincerely,



Olga Lioudvinevitch
ID: 20418898

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION	1
1. Creative Thinking	2
2. Problem Solving	3
3. Making Executive Decisions	4
CONCLUSION	6
RECOMMENDATIONS	7
REFERENCES	8

INTRODUCTION

The term 'brainstorming' was first coined in the 1940's by Alex Osborn, an advertising executive from the United States. He was displeased with the amount of creative output produced by his team and so he went about trying to fix this problem. Osborn developed various techniques that, according to him, maximized the value of team brainstorming. He was so successful in his tactics that word caught on and, from that point forward, brainstorming started becoming a widely used practice in the workplace. While it continues to be a popular practice even today, it is important to understand the situations in which group brainstorming is the best use of employee time. It is foolish to believe that every problem can be solved through team brainstorming. Inversely, it is wrong to think that it has zero value in the workplace.

The following paper will focus on evaluating the act of team brainstorming in business with respect its advantages and disadvantages in the following stages:

1. Coming up with creative ideas
2. Problem solving
3. Making executive decisions

Through analysis of secondary research and first-hand experience, this report will demonstrate the benefits and limitations of each situation in order to determine and subsequently recommend the scenarios in which the value of team brainstorming is maximized for a business.

1. Creative Thinking

Teams will use brainstorming as a way to come up with new ideas for the business. Creative brainstorming is a great way to start the decision making process because there are no limitations to what people come up with. At this stage, the level of expertise or qualification matters very little and so, everyone can participate and feel involved. In his book, *Applied Imagination*, the father of brainstorming - Alex Osborn, suggests that there are two basic principles to ideative efficacy in team brainstorming: (1) defer judgement, and (2) reach for quantity (Osborn 141). He affirmed that the best way to get an effective result in one session is to have everyone feel free from judgement and get out as many ideas as possible. This is certainly an effective technique and there is evidence to support his recommendations. At Denver, Postmaster, T.G. Hefner and his management staff brainstormed the question "What can be done to reduce man-hour usage?" The panel of 12 produced 121 suggestions in 60 minutes. According to an official publication of the Post Office, some of the resultant ideas helped to effect a saving of 12 666 man hours within the following nine weeks. (Osborn 185).

Though there are clear benefits to brainstorming for creative purposes, it also has its limitations. Take into consideration those people that take longer to process information than others. Many individuals need personal time to let their ideas brew and evolve; this is the most effective way to have the best ideas come to fruition. In his book, *The Art of Thought*, Graham Wallas demonstrates that true creativity takes longer than one brainstorming session. He outlined these 5 stages to the creative thinking process:

- (i) Preparation (preparatory work on a problem that focuses the individual's mind on the problem and explores the problem's dimensions),
- (ii) Incubation (where the problem is internalized into the unconscious mind and nothing appears externally to be happening),
- (iii) Intimation (the creative person gets a "feeling" that a solution is on its way),
- (iv) Illumination or insight (where the creative idea bursts forth from its preconscious processing into conscious awareness); and
- (v) Verification (where the idea is consciously verified, elaborated, and then applied).

(Wallas) From this section, we can conclude that even though team brainstorming with respect to creative thinking is often positive, there are times when individuals will take longer to process the best ideas. The best brainstorming session is one that all participants have been preparing for.

2. Problem Solving

Many organizations, large or small, hold team meetings for brainstorming purposes in order to solve existing problems with the business. It seems intuitive to do so, considering the age old proverb 'two heads are better than one', but can this be applied to all problem solving situations? We will approach this question by first distinguishing the varying degrees of problem solving taking place as well as the modes of discussion taking place.

First let us introduce the distinction between addressing large versus small problems. Parkinson's Law of Triviality states that 'The time spent on any item of the agenda will be in inverse proportion to the sum [of money] involved" (Ritter 1). In his example, Parkinson compares the amount

of time it takes to deliberate on building a bicycle shed versus the time it takes to deliberate on building an atomic reactor. He argues that building an atomic reactor is so vastly expensive and complicated, that only a few experts could make the decisions, thereby decreasing the time spent on deliberations; while something like a bicycle shed is so simple, that everyone will have their own vision on how to build it and the deliberations process will become longer and drawn out. From this perspective, we shall conclude that brainstorming sessions which focus on solving small issues are a wasteful use of company time and money while more serious problems could actually benefit from the collaboration of a group of well-informed people.

Secondly, we should address the mode of discussion taking place within the group problem solving session: is everyone equal or is there a designated leader? A study by Norman Maier suggests that “a leader can upgrade a group’s thinking and cause the members to discover a better solution to a problem by asking good questions and influencing the direction of their thinking” (219). In his study, Maier contrasts developmental discussion, where the leader guides the process by breaking the problem into parts so that all members can see the various aspects of the issue, with free discussion, where the leader merely conducts the goings on. The study found that the developmental discussion lead to higher quality decisions than those of the free discussion because of more synchronised thinking as well as systematic coverage (Maier 256). From this point, we can infer that having a skilled leader to lead discussion and ask questions makes team problem solving becomes much more effective than it would be in a free and open forum.

3. Making Executive Decisions

In a lot of cases, executive decisions will be made by those in command and their closest confidants, although there are situations such as in smaller companies, or in specialized work teams, where executive decisions will be made with the involvement of an entire group. Making decisions as a team can be a positive way to acknowledge everyone's views and get people involved; it is a very democratic way to instil change and progress as a company. Although, once the options have been laid out and it is time to make a choice between them, some teams will unfortunately fall into the trap of 'groupthink.' "Groupthink refers to the tendency for group members striving to agree with one another to interfere with rational constructive decision-making" (Manz 7). This can occur for many reasons such as:

- Direct social pressure against divergent views
- Self-censorship of concerns
- Illusion of invulnerability to failure
- Illusion of unanimity
- Self-appointed mind guards that screen out external information
- Collective efforts to rationalize decisions

(Manz 12). Many members are hesitant to share their opinion and thus fall into the trap of groupthink. I know that during my work term, I felt exactly like this; I felt that a junior member of the team should have less to say than the Chief Executive Officer (CEO). As I grew more comfortable in my role I began to understand that I was the expert in my field and that my views on certain topics were very valuable. From this section, it is important to take away the understanding that making executive decisions by group can be a good thing, if it does not fall into the trap of groupthink. Group think can be avoided by encouraging open expression and divergent views, as well as recognizing the uniqueness of other members and treating everyone with an equal level of respect (Manz 7).

CONCLUSION

There are various reasons a business would choose to hold a team brainstorming session; benefits and limitations exist for each of them.

In the case of creative thinking, producing a great number of ideas free from judgement could give an executive committee a list of workable solutions to choose from, but it is also important to consider that some of the best ideas have not had a chance to formulate because of the short timespan allotted for brainstorming.

In the scenario of problem solving it is important to consider the weight of the problem: a smaller problem should not take a whole group to figure out; this leads to time being wasted and the company losing money paying hourly wages of all the employees present. On the other hand, when there are big issues with the company, having many employees brainstorm the best solution is a worthy use of both time and money because it involves expert opinions into the resolution

With executive decision making, teams have the tendency to fall into 'groupthink', by taking time to make sure that this does not happen, companies can reap the benefits of a democratic process i.e. getting everyone to feel involved in the company.

This paper would conclude that over all, team brainstorming is a positive thing in a business and can encourage participation and development of new ideas. In some cases, team brainstorming will produce the best solution. However, specific conditions must be present for this to occur.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- A well informed, discussion leader, should be designated for every brainstorming session in order to guide the process and ask questions along the way
- To maximize the benefit of a brainstorming session for the purposes of creative thinking, an open forum, free from judgement is recommended. Discussion leaders should make this clear at the beginning of the session and affirm it throughout by acknowledging everyone's viewpoints equally and giving everyone a chance to speak
- For the purposes of creativity, participants should try to come up with as many ideas as they can no matter how crazy or wild they are, and these ideas should be received with zero criticism from the rest of the group
- Managers should make sure that all participants are prepared for a brainstorming session. One way to achieve this is to schedule the session days in advance and encourage people to bring ideas that they have already had time to develop to the table
- In the case of problem solving, brainstorming should only be practiced for weightier issues rather than insignificant ones in order to take advantage of employee time
- With executive decision making, discussion leaders should take steps to eliminate groupthink by encouraging open expression and divergent views, as well as recognizing the uniqueness of other members and treating everyone with an equal level of respect

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