

Brainstorming (/Brainstorming)

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Better Brainstorming

By CB

Brainstorming is a highly effective tool in a group's toolkit for solving problems in creative ways. Understanding the definition, origin, and usage of the word itself is helpful in understanding how to brainstorm more effectively by utilizing groups and thus solve problems more efficiently.

It is important to first know what brainstorming is in order to understand it. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, brainstorming is "a group problem-solving technique that involves the spontaneous contribution of ideas from all members of the group", or; "the mulling over of ideas by one or more individuals in an attempt to devise or find a solution to a problem" ("Brainstorming," 2013, [Def. 1]). The Oxford English Dictionary offers a similar definition: "The action or process of making a concerted attempt to solve a problem, usually by a group discussion of spontaneously arising ideas" ("Brainstorming," 2013, [Def. 2]).



Groups in Action

Drawing from Thesaurus.com, synonyms for brainstorming include words (and phrases) such as "put heads together," "rack brains," "share ideas," "conceive," and "create" ("Brainstorming," 2013, [Def. 1]). None of these synonyms manages to capture the complete definition of brainstorming; the first three do not describe the spontaneous idea generation of brainstorming, and the last two fail to incorporate more than a single person into the process. Since there are no other words that encompass the full process of brainstorming, brainstorming is a unique word for identifying a specific phenomenon.

Continuing to study Thesaurus.com's "brainstorming" entry, its listed antonyms are "destroy," "forget," "ignore," and "neglect" ("Brainstorming," 2013, [Def. 1]). These antonyms give additional insight into the exact meaning of brainstorming. They all have to do with discarding, both intentionally and not. These antonyms show that brainstorming is a process that tries to create something from nothing, to fill a creative void with ideas and solutions.

The word "brainstorming" also has a broad cultural scope; it is an expression in other languages besides English. According to WordReference.com, in Spanish, "brainstorming" is explicitly translated as "ejercicio para aportar ideas", or idea-gathering exercise, but the expressions actually used are "lluvia de ideas", literally a rain of ideas, or "tormenta de ideas", or a storm of ideas ("Brainstorming," 2013, [Def.1]). The literal translations of these expressions show that Spanish-speaking cultures have a similar conception of brainstorming to our own: people throwing out a large quantity of ideas in order to find a creative solution. The origin of the word "brainstorming" can also give clues to the word's ties to groups. The term was coined in the 1940s by A. F. Osborn, an advertising executive interested in effective creative problem solving. He created structured brainstorming sessions for his employees and saw improvement in their ability to reach quality solutions to problems. According to his 1953 book, *Applied Imagination*, two main principles governed proper brainstorming: deferring judgment, and reaching for quantity. From these principles, he established four rules of brainstorming: Focus on quantity, withhold criticism, welcome unusual ideas, and combine and improve ideas (*Applied Imagination*, 1953, pp. 300-301).

Since A. F. Osborn introduced brainstorming as a specific technique of problem solving, its definition has become broader, according to Sue Steege, a former graduate student of Buffalo State University, in her essay on the subject. It is now also used to refer to several related processes such as individual thinking and group discussion. These new definitions fail to capture the unique characteristics of true brainstorming, however, weakening the process (Steege, 1999).

What makes brainstorming in groups more effective than individual mulling? As evidenced by its definitions, proper brainstorming has several integral parts that make it more effective, the first of which being that it is a group process. A group of people has a much larger collection of knowledge and experience to draw from than an individual. When a new problem arises, it is probably similar to a problem that at least one member of the group has encountered and solved before. The solution to this problem in the past can be used to solve the current issue. The word "brainstorming" can therefore be seen as referring to multiple "brains", or people, pooling their experience to solve problems.

Another integral part of brainstorming is shared in verbatim by both definitions: "spontaneous" contribution of ideas. This off-the-cuff aspect of brainstorming differentiates it from a regular group activity by establishing the environment as a "safe zone" where ideas are only produced, not judged. A.F. Osborn wrote that all criticism should be withheld until enough ideas had been presented (*Applied Imagination*, 1953, p.300). In a brainstorming session, group members can feel comfortable presenting rough or far-fetched ideas without fear of rejection and humiliation. Thus, creative solutions are frequently reached that would never have even been introduced otherwise.

As most people learned in middle-school English class, brainstorming is an initial step in any creative undertaking, from writing an account of your summer vacation activities to solving a complex scientific problem. However, that limited definition omits the important factor that separates brainstorming from regular thinking: it is most effective when performed by a group! When a group, such as an advertising agency or an automobile design team, understands and uses the process of brainstorming correctly, they are able produce a greater quantity of ideas, allowing them to solve more problems and become more successful.

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