



## Practical Tips for Brainstorming Across Borders

Here are some guidelines taken from our *Brainstorming Across Borders* webinar, where participants use phone and FaciliatePro web meeting technology to learn new tools and techniques to encourage the best creative thinking from remote participants.

### Overall Process Considerations

#### Key factors to consider

What aspects of preparing and running a brainstorming session need to be reconsidered for a virtual session, vs F2F?

*Comments:*

1. Getting people to agree to the virtual session in the first place. Overcoming people's skepticism that any technology can work.
2. The agenda needs to be strict and sound so that it can be used as a "thread" for the whole meeting
3. Also how to have people to keep coming back.
4. Make sure that question that you are talking about is formatted correctly - that it is powerful enough to engage people and draw them in, that it is a burning question that people really care about.

### Problem Definition Considerations

#### May be best done up front in separate meeting

Perhaps with some different people (vs. those involved in brainstorming)

#### Pre-work for problem definition meeting

Pre-work for problem definition meeting may consist of a few well-chosen questions sent in a survey, such as:

- Describe in one sentence the problem for which we need a solution
- If we solve this problem, what benefits can we realistically expect?

#### Validating that the problem is 'just right' (not too big and not too small)

*Comments:*

1. E.g., if customers have long wait time on hold when calling our service desk, are we trying to minimize wait time, or are we trying to make customer wait time more productive for customers and for us?

#### Common understanding of the problem

Make sure that everyone comes prepared with similar knowledge about the problem to be solved

*Comments:*

1. Will require testing/stating, both in pre-work and during session, to make sure everyone is in synch--especially if not everyone was involved in problem-definition discussions
2. Focus exchange: Look at the problem from different perspectives---how would a child interpret the problem? A client? A teacher?
3. Create an "as is" portrait with metaphors. E.g. If our delivery system were an animal, it would be a sloth. (Probe for adjectives to say more about why a sloth was chosen---slow, lazy, inert, etc.)



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### **Challenge assumptions and constraints**

Test to see if constraints are real or artificial---e.g.: is budget really an issue? What if we can make a business case for making a greater investment?

*Comments:*

1. Make sure everyone has same assumptions - about problem, about constraints, boundaries, etc. Can be done up front or in the moment
2. Are boundaries global in nature (will always be true) or specific to this situation? Which can be moved and which not?

### **Agree as to what kind of changes are we seeking?**

Incremental or revolutionary? Immediately implementable or new ideas/directions?

Are our boundaries fairly well-defined, or limitless?

## **Workshop Planning Considerations**

### **Preparation and planning - Pre-work**

*Comments:*

1. Problem definition communicated
2. Brainstorming process explained
3. Online survey to get the wheels going in advance
4. Evaluation process, timing explained

### **Decide whether anonymity is important**

*Comments:*

1. Can help create a level playing field
2. Some cultures less likely to contribute "openly," especially if there are senior members of a group on the call
3. The more contentious a topic is the more likely anonymity may be a plus
4. Can detract from "pride of ownership" when the idea is popular
5. May want anonymity for only certain activities such as voting

### **Asynch or synch?**

Will people brainstorm at same time, at different times or a combination?

*Comments:*

1. Combination is often ideal--for it accommodates people who can't participate in real-time session, and it allows people to build on ideas at least two different ways
2. Consider how you can use asynch, synch in parallel, or sequentially

### **Participant selection**

*Comments:*

1. Tapping diverse base with fresh perspective
2. Use synch and asynch to be more inclusive
3. Access to needed technology and comfort in use
4. Know cultural differences and dispositions to brainstorm "openly"
5. Accommodate language differences (multiple channels of participation)
6. Consider ideal number (e.g. 5-7? in face to face), may be able to have a few more in virtual but not a large group - especially if you want to get to a conclusion/decision.
7. Number of people may depend on type of people - more auditory learners and participants may mean more talking time and therefore less people.

### **Duration - how much time do we have**

What can we get done in a 90-120 minute remote meeting?

## **Divergent Thinking Considerations**

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### **Facilitating the synchronous online workshop**

*Comments:*

1. Phone and web simultaneous ideal --allows for people to contribute different ways
2. Brain lubrication exercise to open right brain – such as "What uses can you think about for a Q-tip? Coat hanger?"
3. Other techniques that may work especially well online

### **Challenge your own assumptions about what can and cannot be done F2F**

*Comments:*

1. Stimulation is equally important

### **Introducing stimuli**

Can be questions, images, objects?

*Comments:*

1. "What if" questions can be useful -- increase/decrease, eliminate, alter, modify, combine, intensify, lighten, etc.

## **Synthesizing Ideas - Convergent Thinking Considerations**

### **Can be done quickly online for a 'sense' of participants**

vs. F2F, which may take a long time with dots, show of hands, voting, etc.

### **Setting expectations for what happens next**

Be careful not to set unrealistic expectations about what idea-creation group is empowered to make decisions about

### **May require separate meeting, spaced close in time to this one**

*Comments:*

1. Sometimes people who participated in idea generation are not the same as those who evaluate quality of ideas
2. Make sure to set realistic expectations about who's involved with creating a "short list" if not the idea generation group

### **Establishing criteria in advance is critical**

Can eat up time online, and can be biased if done after the fact

*Comments:*

1. Regardless of who decides and when, make sure that criteria and relative weighting has been determined and communicated in advance so there are no surprises--and less likely to have contention when certain ideas are picked and not others

### **Use breaks to allow ideas to percolate**

This could be a walk around break, a lunch break or coming back the next day.

*Comments:*

1. may also want to separate divergent thinking and synthesizing of ideas.

### **Categorizing and prioritizing ideas may be an important participative process**

Consider to what degree can these be done for the participants, by the facilitator or the client. Sometimes the facilitator can move the process forward and maintain momentum. Other times consensus building is critical and it needs to be a participant driven process.

## **Meeting Output and Follow-up**

### **How to get the results of the meeting out to participants promptly**

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Getting meeting minutes and output to participants so that they can get moving on any action items is critical to maintaining momentum. With remote meetings there is sometimes a rush at the end of the session and people quickly drift off to their other responsibilities.

*Comments:*

1. Leave time at the end of the meeting for next steps.
2. Print or save meeting output promptly and send or email it around. Collaboration technology may help with this.

### **Anticipate Next Steps and Follow-on Requirements**

The generally short nature of remote meetings tends to mean that they are often one in a series of activities. As far as possible, anticipate what needs to come next so that this can be handled promptly and efficiently at the end of the meeting.

*Comments:*

1. Asking for volunteers for action items can be more difficult with remote meetings
2. As a facilitator, be prepared to hand back responsibility to the client, team leader or team members for next steps so that you don't walk away with them all.

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