

“Oh no! Not another brainstorming session!”

Brainstorming is often seen as the panacea for bosses looking for creative solutions or team involvement during the thinking process. That's when the dreaded words are heard: “let's brainstorm this issue.” What usually happens is the team gets stuck swirling around the same weather-beaten ideas, the same people are the only ones contributing (or not contributing), and the boss gets upset because no one took ownership of the problem.

Despite this rather gloomy picture, brainstorming is a very useful and relevant business tool today, especially when two myth-busting truths are revealed first.

Myth 1: *Brainstorming is the best way to involve everyone in the solution-finding process.*

The truth: This is true only when the boss understands and respects the unique personalities of his team, and uses different ways to encourage participation. In any meeting, the different personality characteristics of the team will be evident and some will always speak up and some will not. It is the silent group that should be of more concern to the boss. These people are usually reflective and reticent and need time to understand the issue, have a gut feel or look for specific evidence, engage in a private decision-making process, and only respond when they feel comfortable.

The solution: The onus is on the boss to understand how each team member will respond when put in a room full of very different personalities. Instead of saying that everyone should be open and responsive, far better results are reached when the team is encouraged to respond in a way that is aligned with ability and preference. If the quiet achievers need personal time and space, then so be it. If the spontaneous ones dominate the session, then so be it. It is more important to engage everyone in a way that matches and respects their personality types.

Bottom line for the boss: Discover each team member's personality preferences.

New truth 1: *Brainstorming is the best way to involve everyone in the solution-finding process and everyone responds differently in such a setting. Some come up with an idea a minute, others need the time and space to reflect and respond later, perhaps in private and with a written summary.*

Myth 2: *Brainstorming will always provide creative and “out of the box” solutions.*

The truth: This only happens with good framing and formulating of the issue. Avoid framing the issue with typical questions like, “how do we generate more sales?” or “how do we win this contract?” or “how will this help us?” One of the worst questions that can be asked is “what are we looking for today?” Such death knell questions only give rise to conventional, boring and predictable solutions. Creative, useful and innovative solutions are reached when brainstorming sessions start with unusually framed questions such as:

- What if our main customer walked out on us? What would we do to win him back?
- If we could start our business again, what

would we do differently with the benefit of hindsight?


- What would Steve Jobs (or someone related to the industry) do if he were here?

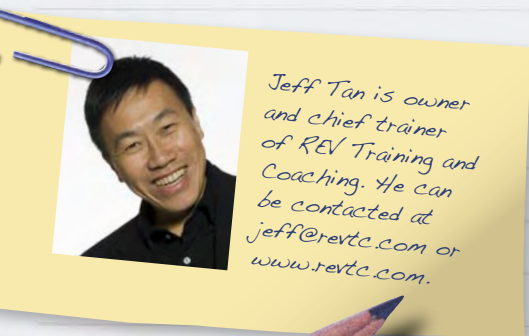
The solution: Go crazy and release the creative juices. As we all know, using creativity to approach a challenge from a completely different perspective can result in unexpected solutions.

Bonus creative solution: For even more creative brainstorming, hold a short pre-brainstorming session a week before the actual one. During this pre-brainstorm, frame the challenge or issue with as many questions as possible. Formulate and re-formulate the issue, and then re-formulate again and again and again. No solutions are allowed at this point. Stop and do nothing during the week and new ideas, new perspectives and new solutions will slowly bubble up from the unconscious mind. During traditional brainstorming, it is the conscious mind that does all the work and only answers that we already know spring up. Creativity, a product of our imagination, comes from the unconscious mind and the pre-brainstorm brings out the best from our unconscious mind.

Bottom line for the boss: To get unconventional and better results, do something different by asking very different brainstorming questions.

Myth-busting truth 2: Brainstorming will always provide creative and “out of the box” solutions when used with different and unusually framed questions, giving time for the unconscious mind to work its magic.

Brainstorming is about action, and instead of reading and nodding in agreement with this article, remember the wise words of Friedrich Engels, who once said, “An ounce of action is worth a ton of theory.” 



Jeff Tan is owner and chief trainer of REV Training and Coaching. He can be contacted at jeff@revtc.com or www.revtc.com.

Got an article idea for “Manager’s Notebook”? Contact *Insight* Editor-in-Chief Justin Chan at justin.chan@amcham-shanghai.org.