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## Focus on Innovation

Focus on Innovation is a monthly electronic newsletter designed to provoke thoughts and ideas on how to bring innovation to life within the organizations in which we work.

### For Those on the Run

IDEO, an award winning design and development company, has been widely recognized as a company that knows how to spark innovation. The *Wall Street Journal* dubbed IDEO as "Imagination Playground", while *Fortune* titled its visit to IDEO "A Day at Innovation U." In their book, *The Art of Innovation: Lessons in Creativity From IDEO, America's Leading Design Firm*, Tom Kelley and Jonathan Littman reveal the strategies and secrets they use to continuously innovate, one of which is brainstorming. Learn more about their seven secrets to better brainstorming below.

### Lessons From IDEO: The Perfect Brainstorm

Tom Kelley, CEO of IDEO, claims that although many people he comes across used brainstorming in their organizations people "can deliver more value, create more energy, and foster more innovation through better brainstorming. "Many business people treat brainstorming as a check box, a threshold variable, like 'Can you ride a bicycle?' or 'Do you know how to tie your shoes?' They overlook the possibility that brainstorming can be a skill, an art, more like playing the piano than tying your shoes. You're always learning and can get continuously better." So how do you become "a brainstorming virtuoso" ala the IDEO way?

At IDEO brainstorming is like a religion, one they practice everyday. It is not a regular meeting; it does not take a morning or afternoon and doesn't involve taking notes. "Brainstormer" sessions, as they are called at IDEO, may last an hour maximum, and is seen as an opportunity for teams to "blue sky" ideas early in a project or to solve a tricky problem that's cropped up. So what makes a great brainstormer? Here are IDEO's seven secrets to better brainstorming:

1. **Sharpen the Focus** - Start with a well-defined statement of the problem. This could be in the form of a question or "How to" statement. "Edgy is better than fuzzy". Make the problem statement open-ended rather than too narrow where the answer may be already implied. At IDEO they have found that the best topic statements focus *outward* on a specific customer need or service enhancement rather than focusing *inward* on some organizational goal.

2. **Playful Rules** - Critiquing or debate ideas during this phase will only serve to sap energy out of the session. At IDEO most conference rooms contain the brainstorming rules stencilled in six-inch-high letters on the walls. They include things like: "Go for quantity", "Encourage wild ideas", or "Be visual". Not everyone knows or remembers the rules of brainstorming; make them visible for everyone to see.
3. **Number Your Ideas** - Seems obvious? Interestingly it took IDEO ten years to figure out how valuable this simple approach is. By numbering the ideas you can: (1) motivate participants before and during the session, e.g.: "Let's try to get a hundred ideas before we leave the room" or gauge the fluency of ideas that are being produced; and (2) jump back and forth from idea to idea without losing track of where you are. At IDEO a hundred ideas per hour is an indication that they have had a good, fluid brainstorming session.
4. **Build and Jump** - Good facilitators pay attention to nurturing an emerging conversation with a light touch in the first phase and knowing enough to let ideas flow during the steep part of the ideation curve. They know how to keep the energy going when it starts to fade or when to switch gears when the discussion tapers off. The key is to build on an idea; encourage another push or introduce a small variation; or take a jump, either back to an earlier path you skipped by too quickly or forward to a completely new approach.
5. **The Space Remembers** - It is important to write the flow of ideas down in a medium visible to the whole group. There are many low-tech tools to help you do this, like Sharpie markers, giant Post-its for the walls, and rolls of old-fashioned Butcher shop paper on the tables. Use the space you have available to your advantage.
6. **Stretch Your Mental Muscles** - Sometimes it is necessary to do warm-ups to get the group going, particularly if they have not worked together before, they have not brainstormed frequently, or the group is distracted by pressing but unrelated issues. Clearing the mind of the group before starting can improve your brainstorming sessions immensely. Try using word games or brainteasers, anything that will loosen people up and get them in the mood to come up with lots of ideas.
7. **Get Physical** - Good brainstorms at IDEO are extremely visual; they include sketching, mind, mind mapping, diagrams, and stick figures. The key is to leave your performance anxieties at the door and bring in whatever visual tools you have available that you believe would help the group. They could include materials to build prototypes, competitive products or elegant solutions from other fields; you name it.

Interestingly, although 70 percent of business people will say that they use brainstorming in their organizations, 76 percent admitted they brainstorm less than a month (Results from a Arthur Anderson survey conducted in 2000). The fact is everyone brainstorms, but we can always get better at it.

### What's the Bottom line

Become a "a brainstorming virtuoso" making brainstorming in your organization a fun, invigorating experience that can take your projects and teams to a new level.

This newsletter was adapted from: Tom Kelley and Jonathan Littman's book, *The Art of Innovation: Lessons in creativity From IDEO, America's Leading Design Firm*. New York, NY: Doubleday, 2001.



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