Brainstorming Techniques

Difficult problems require creative solutions. In government, it can be hard to shift our minds from "the way things have always been done" to see other possibilities. To change this, we must be intentional about how we work together to generate and nurture ideas.

Traditional brainstorming sessions often result in one or two loud voices drowning out the rest, popular ideas getting undue praise and less popular ideas getting snubbed or ignored. This type of brainstorming is not productive and does not support creative problem solving.

Brainstorming potential solutions is the second step of the Innovating phase of the Process Improvement Cycle (Box 5 of the A3 Report.) The following tools and techniques are designed to promote inclusion and greater creativity as teams identify solutions. Regardless of the technique(s) chosen, the facilitator should take care to remind the group of the group's ground rules and the following fundamentals for brainstorming:

- Everyone needs to be familiar with the problem
- No judgement or criticism during brainstorming
- Wild ideas are welcome, but stay on topic
- Everyone's voice is valued

Silent Post-It Technique

The Silent Post-It Technique is a technique for generating a large volume of ideas where all participants remain silent. This allows participants to think without distractions or being influenced by the ideas of others. It also provides an opportunity for all participants to have an equal opportunity to share their ideas, including those who may traditionally stay silent or be silenced during traditional brainstorming sessions.

To facilitate the Silent Post-It Technique, provide all participants with a pad of Post-its and a marker and post the problem statement up where all participants can see it. Set a time limit within which participants should silently and independently come up with as many ideas or solutions as possible. These should be recorded one idea per Post-it.

Once time is called, the facilitator should collect all the Post-its and neutrally read and post all of them to a wall or white board. At this stage in the brainstorming process, the facilitator should not attempt to group what they believe to be similar ideas or solutions (see Affinity Diagram).

On Your Feet

The On Your Feet technique is similar to the Silent Post-It Technique but includes an element of movement that can help spur creativity. It is helpful when there are multiple related questions or issues that need to be addressed.

To facilitate the On Your Feet technique, post each question or issue that requires idea generation at separate stations around the room. This can be done on posters, chart paper, or

white boards. Set a time limit within which participants should silently circulate and post their responses to each prompt using Post-its at each station.

Unlike the Silent Post-It Technique, participants who arrive at a station later in the session will have the benefit of reading what prior participants have recorded. Urge participants to consider each station's prompts independently and not to review prior responses before developing their own.

ABCs

The ABCs technique is helpful for situations in which participants are having a difficult time identifying solutions, and it provides groups with an opportunity for levity and enhanced creativity.

To facilitate the ABCs technique, start by posting the question or problem statement. This can be done at the top of a piece of chart paper. Then ask for solutions that start with the letter A, then B, and so on. Record all the responses on the chart paper as they are provided.

Facilitators should take care to make sure all participants have an opportunity to contribute. Call on participants who have not yet contributed and remind those who contribute frequently that the group needs to hear from all voices.

Going to Extremes

The Going to Extremes technique is useful in situations when the ideas that a group has generated so far are not sufficiently creative or insightful to properly address the challenge at hand. To get the creative juices flowing, framing the challenge in terms of extremes can be helpful.

To facilitate the Going to Extremes technique, ask participants to consider how they would solve the problem under several extreme scenarios. For example, if the group were trying to brainstorm solutions to a parking-related issue that requires spaces for 100 vehicles, the facilitator could ask:

- How could we solve this problem if we had to accommodate 1,000 vehicles? 10,000?
- How could we solve this problem if we had unlimited financial resources?
- How could we solve this problem if we had absolutely no funds available?

By pushing the group to think about the problem in more abstract terms, they may develop creative ideas that are scalable to the issue at hand.

Yes, And

When a group is working together to generate ideas, it is common to hear individuals reply to new ideas with phrases like:

- That would never work because…
- We would never get approval for…
- That's too expensive…

While these types of responses can be deflating to the person on the receiving end of them, those who utter them generally have good intentions. They want to share what they perceive to be limiting parameters or potential challenges to implementation. Unfortunately, these types of statements have a chilling effect on creativity. If we know our ideas will be shot down every time we share them, will we keep contributing?

The "Yes, And" concept comes from improvisational comedy. It is a powerful tool that comedians use to build on one another's contributions and explore creative ideas. By very intentionally responding to new ideas with the phrase, "Yes, And…" we can **affirm** the validity of an idea and **contribute** to its success.

You can adopt the "Yes, And" approach with your project teams, discussing it up front prior to brainstorming sessions, and by adding it as one of your team's ground rules.

Affinity Diagram

An Affinity Diagram is a tool that is used to gather large amounts of ideas generated during brainstorming sessions and organize them into groupings based on their natural relationships. Developing an Affinity Diagram is a good way to get participants to consider how ideas are interrelated and encourage new patterns of thinking.

To facilitate an Affinity Diagram, post all the ideas generated during a group brainstorming session on a wall or white board. Ask participants to silently sort all the ideas by placing related ideas into separate groupings or columns. The purpose of doing the initial sorting silently is to encourage independent thought and to allow for participants to uncover non-obvious relationships. It also discourages disagreements over semantics and ensures that all participants have an opportunity to engage in the process. If a disagreement arises over the placement of an idea, the facilitator should duplicate the Post-it and place the idea in both contested locations.
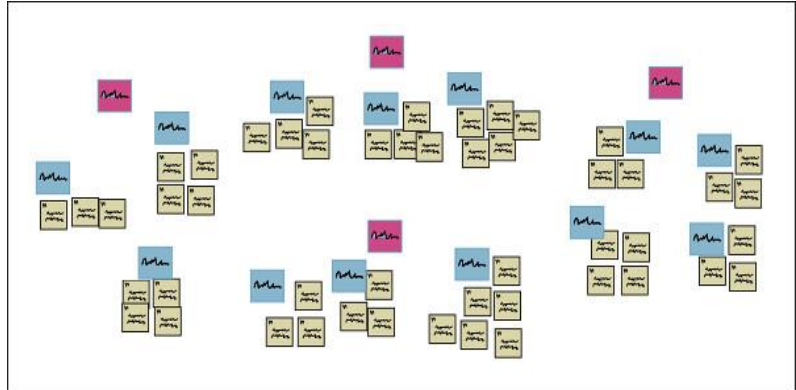
Once all the ideas have been sorted, the facilitator should create headers for each of the groupings. This header should include a phrase or sentence that conveys relationship of each of the ideas in the group.

Ideas that have not been sorted into a group should be given their own headers rather than "forcing" them into a group. Groups that are related may be combined into "super-groups" if necessary.

To finalize the Affinity Diagram, the facilitator should document the final groupings. This can be done simply in Word or PowerPoint or using an online tool such as Lucidchart.

Impact/Effort Matrix

An Impact/Effort Matrix is a decision making tool that helps project teams prioritize options based upon their relative impact and effort. The level of impact, or how much an option would help to solve the problem, is plotted on the vertical axis and the level of effort that implementing that option would require is plotted on the horizontal axis.

Based upon their placement, ideas will fall into one of four quadrants:

Quick Wins: Solutions that require little effort and will greatly impact the issue at hand. These tasks can and should be completed quickly and easily.

Major Projects: Solutions that will have a high level of impact on the issue but will require significant effort. Major Projects should be prioritized and may be broken into smaller sub-projects to make incremental progress.

Fill-In / Delegate: Solutions that require little effort but will also have a lower impact relative to other solutions. These solutions can be implemented during time downtime or delegated to others for completion.

	High Impact / Low Effort **Quick Win!**	High Impact / Hight Effort **Major Projects**
Impact	Low Impact / Low Effort **Fill-In / Delegate**	Low Impact / High Effort **Thankless Tasks**
	Effort	

Thankless Tasks: These solutions would have a low level of impact on the issue and require significant effort. Unless there is a compelling regulatory reason to complete them, they are best avoided so that time can be spent on higher impact solutions.