To Get Your Team Brainstorming Great Ideas, Start With Crazy

Remember, great ideas can come from anywhere.

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Recycling is a very good thing — except when it comes to ideas. Given the speed of change that's driving business today, your company may be heading for trouble if you're recycling the same offerings over and over again. Yet, no matter how brilliant any owner or executive may be, there are only so many times you can go back to the same personal well for the next game-changing idea. One big challenge for many business leaders comes down to this: How do you foster consistent, critical and creative thinking throughout your enterprise?

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As a design and innovation leader at Farmers Insurance, my job revolves around providing answers to that question. I know that to grab attention in a crowded marketplace, companies, whether large or small, need to deliver fresh products and services on a regular basis. They need new ideas, they need them consistently, and they usually need them right now. And to generate those ideas, I've found that brainstorming while embarking upon the design thinking process can be a highly effective way out of that "same old, same old" rut.

I know team members often sigh inwardly when design thinking

and brainstorming get put on the schedule: “There goes that afternoon.” But, done the right way, design thinking lets you re-evaluate processes that your organization currently has in place and figure out how to do them better. Here’s what I mean by doing it the right way, with some practical tips for how to structure your brainstorming sessions.

1. Start with crazy.

People are often reluctant to engage in design thinking because it’s an unfamiliar and potentially risky activity. What if they say the wrong thing! So, the entire process should be presented with a wide-open acceptance of any and all ideas. You need to say explicitly that crazy options are welcome. Let your team know that you wouldn’t have initiated the brainstorm if you weren’t looking to do things differently. Any idea that might elsewhere be too wacky could here be essential. Even if it’s not viable on its own, that idea could help spark the company’s next great innovative product or process.

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It’s often better if the company’s senior leadership doesn’t act as facilitator for the brainstorm. Consider tapping an external facilitator to provide skilled, neutral direction.

Try to find a creative space other than the usual workspace, if at all possible. Not only will this help minimize work distractions, but it will also provide a new perspective for the group.

Start with some fun and engaging icebreakers to loosen up the group members.

2. Add some structure and communicate the goal.

Although you want to encourage creativity, you won't get great input if everyone just starts shouting out ideas. This gives too much weight to the group's louder participants and stifles the contributions of quieter team members. Instead, consider opening with a clear, concrete "challenge statement" or statement of purpose. What specific problem are you trying to solve? Then describe the end user by putting yourself in his or her shoes. Who will the solution impact? What are their experiences? Do some empathy mapping by creating a persona for your end user(s). Post on a whiteboard or large pad the descriptors of what your personas are "Thinking," "Seeing," "Feeling" and "Doing" as they experience life or a specific topic. After understanding who you're designing for, you're ready to begin brainstorming!

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Each person gets a stack of sticky notes on which to write as many ideas or potential solutions that solve for the challenge statement or problem at hand. Take roughly 10 to 12 minutes to do so. You want to encourage quantity over quality at this point, so limit any conversations that might prematurely define solutions.

When time's up, have each person select their own two or three favorite ideas and explain them briefly to the group before adding the sticky notes, without names, to the whiteboard or wall. Review and discuss as a group to clarify and further expand on ideas.

The facilitator can either open a quick discussion, followed by a vote for the group's favorite ideas, or can simply collect the notes for further development. The entire process

should take no more than 30 to 45 minutes.

3. Get rid of your assumptions.

You may think you know what could come out of a specific brainstorming exercise. The beauty of the process, however, lies in the unanticipated connections your team can create when they're given permission to come up with unfiltered ideas. But, don't expect this to be a one-and-done process. Once you've created detailed, concrete options, start getting feedback by testing the solutions with users who could be impacted by the changes. It's likely you will have to revise, get more feedback and revise again. This is a good thing! You're working with your users. Creative solutions don't usually arrive in a single blinding flash of insight but rather in a series of small steps. One idea spurs a new, related thought, which sparks another idea, and so on.

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As you plan further brainstorms, make sure to continually mix up the participating members. The more diversity you create in terms of experience, tenure, jobs and personalities, the more likely you are to foster unexpected solutions and get better participation.

Make sure to take advantage of all the resources available online to enrich the iterative process, both before and after a brainstorming session. There are countless websites and organizations with useful materials and programs that can help you expand on the ideas developed in brainstorms.

It's important to let each group know that their brainstorming work has been meaningful by communicating next steps and providing ongoing updates. Regardless of any final outcomes, you need to validate your team's efforts if you hope to elicit useful insights. Keep in mind participants will want to know

how their work during the session will be used to create meaningful change.

Remember, great ideas can come from anywhere. Fast-paced, diverse and iterative design thinking sessions can help you maximize the likelihood that your company continues to evolve at the speed of today’s changing marketplace.

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