

Brainwriting

Another Way to Generate Ideas

Brainwriting was developed at Stanford University as a tool that captures the best of brainstorming and adds elements of reflection, complete participation, and commentary while retaining the focus on developing large quantities of ideas. It is claimed that brainwriting will, in fact, generate more ideas than brainstorming and my experience supports that assertion.

Brainwriting can be used in many circumstances. I have used it with groups that are in conflict, with groups that have non-participants, with groups that talk past or over each other, with groups that are quick to jump to a conclusion, and with groups that need to look at things from a different perspective. I'm sure after you add brainwriting to your facilitator's toolkit, you'll find other places you can use it effectively.

The process is fairly simple and your toughest job will be to explain the rules and enforce them as the group gets used to a new way of working together. Make sure you read all the rules and understand the process before you start brainwriting with a group.

1. Each person needs a clean sheet of paper with the issue to be worked on clearly stated on the top of the page. You may do this as a spur-of-the-moment exercise and have them write the issue themselves (be certain each person is using the same issue statement) or prepare the sheets before the session.
2. After the process has been explained, each person writes a response (idea) to the statement on his/her page.
3. After an individual has written on his/her sheet, she/he passes the sheet in a predetermined direction (usually clockwise or counter clockwise). Be certain you have thought this direction piece through and have explained it clearly because people can become confused quickly. (This also requires that you think about seating arrangements.)
4. When an individual gets the next sheet, he/she reads what the last person has written and then adds a comment, a piggybacked idea, or a new idea. They then pass the paper again.
5. The papers continue to be passed in this fashion. When a person gets their paper back, it is considered to be one round. Depending on the number of people and the time you have for this activity, you will determine the number of rounds you can do. With very large groups you probably won't complete a round. With very small groups you may be able to do several rounds.
6. If someone gets caught writing a longer response or takes longer to read the previous comments, you may get a stack of papers "stuck" at one person. In this case, you may intervene and pass a sheet by that person. Don't intervene too quickly, however, it may just be one answer and he/she may speed up on the next one.
7. After the writing rounds are completed, you will probably want to do a reading round, which consists of passing the papers one more time to allow everyone to read all the responses.

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8. DURING THIS WHOLE PROCESS THERE IS NO TALKING! This will be the most difficult part for some groups and especially for some people. You will need to explain this rule carefully, with some emphasis, and enforce it strictly. After the group gets into the brainwriting rhythm, it will be easier for them to self-monitor.
9. This technique simply generates ideas. Your next step is to determine how to help the group work with the information/data they've collected through brainwriting.

I hope you'll give brainwriting a try in the near future. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions and I hope you'll share your brainwriting experiences with me.

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