Tool 1 - Brainstorming

TOOL: **Brainstorming** is probably the most well known group technique for generating a list of ideas about a specific task, problem or subject. It generates ideas that range from relevant to irrelevant and sober to wild and crazy. The technique is directed at producing the greatest number and variety of ideas in the shortest amount of time.

WHEN: **Brainstorming** is a good technique to use to get a group relaxed and to start them moving on a project. It may also provide them with options on the initial direction or directions for investigation into the problem.

HOW: **Brainstorming** requires a facilitator and it is helpful to have one or more scribes. The facilitator leads the group through the **Brainstorming** process while the scribe(s) record the ideas that are being generated by the participants. The facilitator can also be the scribe, but it slows the process down and thereby hinders the synergy of the group dynamic in coming up with creative ideas. Below are the steps in the classic **Brainstorming** process:

1. Agree on the Topic to be Brainstormed – The facilitator or the scribe needs to write the topic on the board, or on a pad, for all to see. This is the subject area, the topic, the group is going to brainstorm.

2. Rules for the Scribe – Write every idea on the board, and edit only as absolutely necessary for clarity. Occasionally, the facilitator may have to abbreviate a lengthy idea into a few words or even break an idea down into two separate ideas. This should only be done with the agreement of the originator of the idea.

3. Rules for the Facilitator – You are in charge of the process. You start it and you end it and you keep everyone on track.
- Set a time limit that is short, but also allows enough time for everyone, not only to submit their own ideas, but also to piggyback on the ideas of others.
- Do not allow any discussion of an idea during the session.
- Do not allow any criticisms or judgments during the session.
- Remind the group of the "topic" being brainstormed to keep everyone focused and on track. You may need to do this frequently.
- Create a "***Parking Lot***" list on the side of the issues and ideas that don't fit this topic.
- You *can not* participate! You *can not* toss in your own ideas. You need to stick to the role of the impartial facilitator.

4. Variations of Brainstorming – The following are some **Brainstorming** variations that may be used:
- ***Unstructured*** or ***Freeform*** **Brainstorming** is the most prevalent. The individuals participating contribute ideas as they come to mind. It is also the most common and most relaxed version.
- ***Structured*** **Brainstorming** (Participation in Sequence).
  o If an individual does not have an idea to suggest, the individual may "pass". A complete round of passes will end the session.
- ***Silent*** **Brainstorming**
  o Participants write as many ideas as they wish, each on separate pieces of paper.

- o The pieces are then collected and posted on the board for everyone to see.
- *Combine the Forms of* **Brainstorming**
  - o Start with the "Silent" form. Participants write as many ideas as they wish on a piece of paper which they keep – their list of ideas. (Give them a time limit.)
  - o Switch to the "Structured" form. Request one idea from each individual in sequence – they can read from their list. Allow participants to "pass."
  - o Continue around the group getting one idea at a time until the ideas stop coming.
  - o Then switch to the "Unstructured" form and allow the participants with a lot of ideas to toss those out.

5. Next Step – Often **Brainstorming** is just the first step in a problem solving process. After you have created a list of ideas, whether they are "possible causes of a problem," "possible solutions to a problem," etc.; the list often needs to be narrowed down. The group may agree to just "vote" on the top idea, or you may need another technique for that step.

If you sense the group is going to need to have a more sophisticated selection process than just voting, beforehand you need to do a search on these techniques: Rating Ranking, Nominal Group Technique, Forced Choice Analysis, Force Field Analysis, Double Reversal, and Different Point of View – *for your **next step**.*

TIPS: **1.** The facilitator needs to listen very carefully to the ideas being tossed out in the unstructured form. Make a real effort to get everyone's ideas listed.
2. Often the participants want to see their ideas published after the session as documentation of the process. The scribe needs to save their notes for this purpose.
3. The key to a good **Brainstorming** session is **NO COMMENTS, JUDGMENTS, OR CRITICISMS** on anyone's contribution.