

Reverse brainstorming

Mark Oborn explains a different method of generating new ideas and solving problems

This article is about solving problems using a brainstorm....but wait this is not an ordinary brainstorm, this is a reverse brainstorm. Brainstorming has been used many, many times by many, many people to generate ideas on a variety of subjects.

What is a brainstorm?

A classic brainstorm basically involves gathering the group/team together around a flip chart and shouting out suggestions to solve a problem, these suggestions are written down on the flip chart with no comments and no judging. Once the suggestions have dried up all the options are evaluated and commented on. It is a great way to generate loads of ideas, as one person feeds off another's suggestion all without being judged.

A reverse brainstorm works in a different way and is PERFECT for helping to understand a problem more.

An example

Earlier this year I was asked to act as a consultant at a local charity with about 30 people that were having problems with communication, they asked me to host a 'problem solving' session to try to overcome this communication issue. One of the techniques I used was a reverse brainstorm - this is how it works.

We sat around our flip chart and I told them we were going to do a brainstorm...instantly faces dropped 'Oh man, we have done so many of these before!' was the general response. But rather than ask them to solve the problem I said we were going to brainstorm how to make the problem WORSE...this is the reverse element, this is what makes this brainstorm technique different to the classical technique.

They then started to shout out how to make their problem of communication worse... 'Disrespect each other', 'Talk behind each others backs', 'Not say what



we think', 'Not answer emails' etc etc....you get the picture!

After about 15 minutes we had three flip charts full of ideas of how to make their problem worse! I then said 'How many of these things are you doing?'... silence, then 'Wow....all of them' was the reply!

A powerful message

This was a powerful message to them of what they were doing to make communication within the organisation difficult; we could then set about tackling each of these points raised to try to solve the problem.

Practical application

So if you work in a team in your laboratory and have a problem that needs solving, give this technique a try; it is a very powerful way of bringing to light underlying issues that need solving. Be creative with its use, if your marketing isn't working, reverse brainstorm 'How to make our marketing worse'. If you feel the phone isn't being answered well, reverse brainstorm 'How to answer the phone really badly'....then look to see how many of these things you are doing. For courses on creative thinking and marketing solutions please visit www.markoborn.com