

perspectives

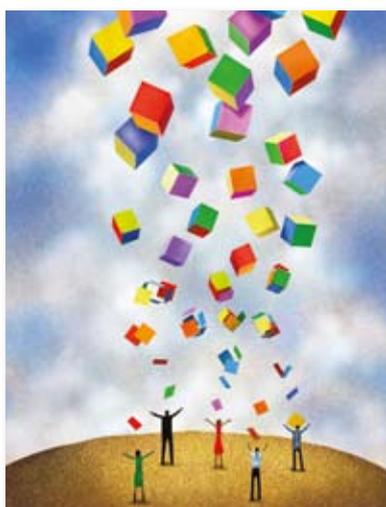
# BUILDING NEW BOXES

## HOW TO RUN BRAINSTORMING SESSIONS THAT WORK

By Luc de Brabandere and Alan Iny

### AT A GLANCE

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Brainstorming has been unfairly maligned. Creativity is more important than ever to competitive advantage, so executives need to up their game about how to generate great ideas.

#### DON'T BLAME THE TOOL IF YOU DON'T LIKE THE RESULTS

There are good ways and bad ways to run a brainstorming session. But rejecting the results of a brainstorming session if you fail to get actionable, breakthrough ideas is as logical as giving up hammers after you smash your thumb.

#### FIVE TIPS CAN SIGNIFICANTLY INCREASE YOUR PROBABILITY OF SUCCESS

Productive brainstorming sessions don't just happen, they must be *designed*. It's important to frame the question carefully, create the right environment, raise and challenge assumptions, offer new mental models within which to explore new ideas, and follow up after the session to formalize next steps.

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**W**HEN THE BREAKTHROUGH IDEAS don't come, don't blame the brainstorming process. That's like giving up on hammers after you smash your thumb. It's always easier to blame the tool than to question your technique, but focusing on blame will fail to fix the underlying issue—every time.

Too often, managers assume that all they need to do is assemble people in a conference room, offer some cookies, provide a vague instruction to think outside the box, and promise that no idea is a bad idea, for creativity to burst out. But instead, this kind of approach usually leads to a painful, meandering process with no meaningful result; grist for a Dilbert cartoon or an episode of *The Office*, perhaps, but little more.

There is a better way (though the cookies don't hurt). In fact, as we argue in our book *Thinking in New Boxes*, human brains really are not wired to think outside the box. Rather, we need various “boxes”—mental models, frameworks, and theories—to make sense of the world's complexity. A strategy, a market segmentation, a vision: these and other boxes help leaders interpret and simplify the complex world in front of them.

To really drive ideation, leaders need to shape the new boxes within which their teams can brainstorm freely and productively. BIC, for example, drove decades of successful growth after shifting from the original box that defined its business, “we make affordable plastic pens,” to a new one, “we make affordable plastic consumer goods.”

In short, a good brainstorming session isn't something that you jump into—it's something you design.

Based on our decades of experience with driving creativity in our clients' companies, we offer five suggestions for how to achieve real, valuable insight from a brainstorming session. Interestingly, almost all of these recommendations focus on what you should do before and after the actual session, not during it, since the session itself is rarely the problem. It's the way people use it that needs some adjustment.

**Never forget that framing the question effectively is half the battle.** Albert Einstein reportedly said, “If I were given one hour to save the planet, I would spend fifty-nine minutes defining the problem and one minute resolving it.” Extreme, perhaps, but the importance of using an effective question, and laying out specific constraints and criteria for success in advance, cannot be overstated.

A good question for brainstorming will be narrow and concrete, so that people feel they know how to begin answering it. Typically, such a question starts with “How could we...?” or “What if...?” It is visceral, enabling people to instinctively understand it in the context of their

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Take people away from their daily routine to change their perspective.

situation. For example, rather than asking a broad question, such as, “How can we improve our brand image in the Indian market?” try asking, “How can we get a 25-year old woman in Mumbai to rave about us to her friends?” Rather than wondering, “How can we come up with new marketing ideas for our airline?” try asking, “How can we ensure that our airline is the first thing that every businessperson in Los Angeles and New York thinks of when booking a trip?” or “How can we ensure that every new Expedia customer sets his or her Web browser’s home page to our website?”

**Create conditions that foster creativity.** Be thoughtful about the environment you create for a brainstorming session. Gather a range of people with diverse perspectives, perhaps even some customers or experts. For example, we asked a toy store owner and a children’s book author to join us in an exercise with members of a company focused on a children’s offering. Try to take people away from their daily routine, to change their perspective and remove their inhibitions. Explicitly encourage full participation, and ensure that junior and senior members alike feel comfortable sharing their ideas, even ones that may seem silly or far-fetched. Make sure that everyone is on board with the plan throughout the exercise: a significant impediment to successful brainstorming is when people in one half of the room are freely generating new ideas while those in the other half are picking those ideas apart.

**Don’t dive straight into a brainstorming session—begin by revealing and doubting your own boxes.** Any significant creative leap begins, first, with a shift in perception. Whether one is engaged in growth, change management, strategic planning, cost cutting, or product or business model innovation, the first step in the creative process entails identifying and doubting one’s current boxes and determining which ones require reevaluation or replacement. Start by making an expansive list of many of the shared beliefs and assumptions about your organization. Discuss them and try to determine which of your organization’s boxes are still relevant and which ones need to be redefined. For a recent project with a government contractor, for instance, we began by identifying some critical shared mental models that everyone held about how they worked with various government departments, how they undertook R&D, and how they sold their products.

**Bring some potential new boxes to the session to nurture ideation; they can dramatically increase the odds of a useful result.** People often lament that the ideas shared in brainstorming sessions are either too trite and expected or too “out there” and impractical. This is a delicate balancing act, and being clear in advance about what you’re after will help. Make sure that you have a well-prepared and effective facilitator; you could even take on the role yourself. Think of the facilitator’s role like that of a bus driver: a good one is well trained, prepared, adaptive, and alert. He or she knows the rules of the road—and you

should have only one per bus. Try conducting a dry run using your proposed question along with some brainstorming techniques, such as changing perspective or experimenting with analogies. This will lead to a clearer sense of what should be on or off the table and what success might look like, as well as help you to develop some examples to share with the group.

**After your brainstorming session, remember to follow up.** People sometimes tell us that a brainstorming session led to good ideas but little subsequent action or change. Voting on your ideas at the end of a session can be a useful exercise to provide closure to participants—but you can't force consensus. Allow things to continue to percolate. Recognize that more ideas may come after your meeting ends. Follow up with participants once ideas are prioritized and the path forward is clear.

**N**INTENDO WAS FOUNDED as a playing-card company in 1889 but became a global leader in high-tech video consoles and the games and applications that run on them. What basic assumptions in its leaders' minds had to change for that evolution to occur? If executives at Nintendo had said, "We are looking for growth, and we should probably be doing something new, so what should that new thing be?" they would have been engaged in classic brainstorming, in trying to think outside the box. Perhaps they would have succeeded. It's much more likely, however, that they would have ended up running around in circles within their existing box of "We're a playing-card company" and come up with new forms of playing cards. They would have remained trapped in the prison of their old biases and assumptions, their established ways of thinking about Nintendo.

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Embrace the ambiguity inherent in any creative process.

The all-important process of doubting one's most significant current boxes—"What is Nintendo?" "Which customers are we trying to serve, and what are they really after?" "Who are we really competing against?"—is a much more reliable way of achieving the underlying shift in thinking that frees people to generate such winning ideas as Nintendo's Wii or the best-selling Mario Bros. games.

Remember that brainstorming in a creativity session is not a "blue-sky," unconstrained exercise. Taking time to consider the dark clouds on the horizon, to identify and question your existing models and assumptions, and only then to pursue classic brainstorming tools and rules will lead to useful results.

Above all, embrace the ambiguity inherent in any creative process. You cannot plan every minute of an ideation workshop or predict the outcome just because time is short or a lot is on the line. Leave room for the unexpected. Sustain doubt. And allow yourself and your team to think in multiple new boxes.

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