

## Skills 360 – Facilitating a Brainstorming Session (Part 1)

### Discussion Questions

1. Do you find brainstorming sessions productive? Why or why not?
2. What are the qualities of a good facilitator?
3. In a brainstorming session, what can help you feel creative and energized?

### Vocabulary

**To brainstorm:** to come up with many possibilities or ideas, often in a group setting; “Okay folks, let’s see if we can brainstorm some possible names for this new product.”

**To generate ideas:** to think of, come up with, or create ideas; “Let’s take this to marketing and let them generate some ideas for the new ads.”

**Facilitator:** someone who helps a group or organization work more effectively, especially in meetings, discussions, and planning sessions; “It is usually best to bring in an outside facilitator to run your strategic planning day.”

**To run the show:** to manage or be in control of a project, meeting, or event; “Gabby’s got a ton of project management experience, so let’s get her to run the show on this new job.”

**To head into:** to enter or be about to enter a situation or place; “Whenever I head into a big presentation, I make sure I have my PowerPoint backed up on a USB drive.”

**To keep something a mystery:** to purposely not tell people about something; “Tomorrow’s really your last day? Why did you keep it a mystery from us?”

**Well in advance:** long before, especially in preparation; “We usually like to submit our bids well in advance of the deadline.”

**To get things going:** to begin or make a start to something; “Before we get things going here, I’ll just pass out some name tags and pens for everyone.”

**To set the stage:** to make preparations for some activity or situation; “A bit of small talk and personal conversation can help set the stage for a good negotiation.”

**To set ground rules:** to make basic rules about how people should act or what they should do in a given situation or setting; “Okay, before we start this little competition, let’s set some ground rules for all the participants.”

**Judgment:** an opinion about whether someone or something is good or bad; “Let’s not rush to judgment about Betty here before we even have a chance to interview her.”

**Guidelines:** basic or general rules or advice about how something should be done; “You can download guidelines for filling out the tax forms from the government website.”

**Creative:** having the ability to think of new things or ideas; “Applicants for the marketing position must be creative, hardworking, and passionate about their ideas.”

**Hard-nosed:** tough, strict, serious, or very determined; "Jonah may be a hard-nosed manager, but that has helped him create a very successful team."

**A bunch of:** a lot of, informally; "The conference was great. I met a bunch of interesting people working in my field."

**To pose a question:** to ask a question, especially formally; "Before beginning your research, you need to take the time to pose your question in clear and specific terms."

**To set a positive tone:** to make a good, happy, or otherwise positive mood or feeling in a place or situation; "The mediator did a good job of setting a positive tone before we got into the difficult job of bargaining."

**To record:** to write down, especially things that happen or events; "The committee secretary's job is to record what is discussed and to send the minutes to participants."

**Clarification:** explanation that helps people understand more clearly; "At the end of the lecture I asked the speaker for some clarification around the concept of risk tolerance."

**Straight-up:** honest and direct, or honestly and directly; "Okay Bob, just tell me straight-up how I did with that sales call. Was it good or bad?"

**Interpretation:** one way of understanding something; "I think for a better interpretation of the data, we should look at a larger piece of the graph."

**To get bogged down:** to become stuck or have difficulty progressing; "Don't get bogged down in details before you agree in principle to work with a new partner."

**Generation:** the act of creating or producing something; "Much of the country's electricity generation is done by nuclear power plants."

**Evaluation:** the act of examining and giving an opinion on whether something is good or bad, or effective or ineffective; "Employee evaluation is an important part of any manager's job."

**To judge:** to think or say whether something is good or bad; "We thought our new TV ads were funny, but participants of our focus groups didn't judge them in the same way."

**To step in:** to get involved in a situation or discussion, especially when there is a problem; "After a 10-week city worker strike, the government finally decided to step in and help negotiate a solution"

**Diplomatically:** in a sensitive way that doesn't upset or offend anyone; "Negative feedback on employee performance should always be given diplomatically."

**To take a closer look:** to examine something or look at it in detail; "When the lawyers took a closer look at the contract, they notices several clauses weighted unfairly toward the other party."

**To spark (ideas):** to make something happen or to inspire new ideas; "The television ad is meant to spark feelings of sadness in viewers."

**At the end of the day:** finally, or after everything else has been considered; "You can use your flex days however you want, but at the end of the day you just need to make sure your work is finished."

**To pare down:** cut down or reduce to smaller size or quantity; "We pared down our list of potential candidates from 20 to 5 after the interviews."

## Transcript

Hello and welcome back to the Skills 360 podcast. I'm your host, Tim Simmons, and today I want to look at how to run an effective [brainstorming](#) session.

Every company uses brainstorming sessions to [generate ideas](#) and solve problems. But do all brainstorming sessions generate *good* ideas? Does everyone leave a brainstorming session feeling like they accomplished something? Well, that often depends on the [facilitator](#). And if *you* are the one to [run the show](#), there are several things you need to think about.

First comes good preparation. People need to [head into](#) a brainstorming session with a good idea about what they're supposed to be talking about. So if you're going to be running the session, don't [keep](#) the topic [a mystery](#). Email everyone [well in advance](#). Make sure people come with a head full of ideas. If they don't know what they'll be doing until they arrive, they may not be as prepared.

Now, what happens when you start that meeting, when everyone's assembled and your job is to [get things going](#)? Well, you need to [set the stage](#) for a productive session, and one great way to do that is to [set some ground rules](#). You might want to create a list of your own that includes things like "turn off cell phones" and "no [judgment](#)." Or you might want to let the group brainstorm their own list. Let *them* determine what [guidelines](#) will ensure they feel safe and free to share ideas. Either way, you should write these guidelines down and display them for everyone to see. But remember, good brainstorming happens when people feel [creative](#), free, and happy, so don't get too [hard-nosed](#) or serious by making [a bunch of](#) "rules."

Once you've got some guidelines, now you can [pose](#) the question or topic for the group. Right at the beginning, make sure you're encouraging and [setting a positive tone](#). When someone produces an idea, respond with "Fantastic, thanks Ron, let's put that up here..." That helps create the right mood, and hopefully soon ideas will start flowing more freely. Once they do, don't interfere. Your job is to [record](#), and to maintain the energy. Keep praising people with comments like "Great stuff Nora" and "Right on Wayne."

Okay, but sometimes people don't express things perfectly clearly. And when this happens, you need to get some [clarification](#). You can do this in a couple of ways. You can [straight-up](#) ask for explanation, like this, "All right Todd, thanks. Can you explain what you mean a bit more?" Notice that we are still thanking and praising. You can also try restating what the person said to test an [interpretation](#). For example, you could say something like, "Okay Todd, thanks. So you're saying that we need to hire more staff? Is that right?" Either way, don't get too [bogged down](#) in explanation. You just want things to be clear enough that everyone knows basically what's being suggested.

Now, one of the most important principles of brainstorming is that we should separate idea [generation](#) from idea [evaluation](#). So producing ideas and [judging](#) them are done separately. Brainstorming is all about the former, not the latter. So when someone says something like "I don't know Todd, that probably wouldn't help at this point," you need to [step in](#). But you should do it [diplomatically](#), like this, "Okay

Todd, let's just focus on getting the ideas out for now and later we can [take a closer look](#), sound good?" What happens when people start evaluating ideas? They stop flowing. And that's not what we want.

It doesn't matter how bad, silly, or crazy the ideas are. Keep the energy going, keep praising the participants, and keep writing things down. Those bad, silly, or crazy ideas can [spark](#) better, saner, more realistic ideas. And [at the end of the day](#), the more ideas there are, the better. And you can move on to evaluating, [paring down](#), and choosing later.

So remember, stay positive, keep the energy flowing, praise the participants, and don't let people get too critical. If you can achieve all this, you'll have a great brainstorming session. Of course, getting people to talk is not always easy. Tune in next time and you'll hear some tips for getting things going and some help with the evaluation stage.

That's all for today. If you'd like to test yourself on what we've just covered, have a look at the [www.myBEonline.com](http://www.myBEonline.com) website. There you'll find a quiz about today's show as well as a complete transcript.

So long. And see you again soon.

## Review

1. What does Tim emphasize as a key component of good preparation?
  - A Sending out guidelines for the session.
  - B Meeting with participants beforehand.
  - C Making people aware of the topic or question.
  - D Rehearsing some of your questioning strategies.
  
2. Once you begin a brainstorming session, what does Tim recommend doing first?
  - A Setting some rules for the session.
  - B Posing the brainstorming question.
  - C Creating a positive tone.
  - D Encouraging creativity.
  
3. According to Tim, good brainstorming happens when people feel...
  - A Inspired, guided, and supported
  - B Energetic, positive, and encouraged
  - C Creative, free, and happy
  - D Open, honest, and talkative
  
4. What does Tim say is the effect of making comments such as "Great stuff Nora" and "Right on Wayne"?
  - A They help to set a positive tone.
  - B They discourage other participants.
  - C They set the stage for effective evaluation of ideas.
  - D They help clarify ideas.
  
5. Tim mentions two different ways of getting clarification of ideas. What are they? [choose 2]
  - A Thanking people for their contribution.
  - B Writing them down and pausing.
  - C Asking directly for explanation.
  - D Restating the idea in other words.
  
6. In brainstorming sessions, Tim stresses the importance of separating idea \_\_\_\_\_ and idea \_\_\_\_\_ .

## Review Answers

1. What does Tim emphasize as a key component of good preparation?  
**C Making people aware of the topic or question.**
2. Once you begin a brainstorming session, what does Tim recommend doing first?  
**A Setting some rules for the session.**
3. According to Tim, good brainstorming happens when people feel...  
**C Creative, free, and happy**
4. What does Tim say is the effect of making comments such as "Great stuff Nora" and "Right on Wayne"?  
**A They help to set a positive tone.**
5. Tim mentions two different ways of getting clarification of ideas. What are they? [choose 2]  
**C Asking directly for explanation.**  
**D Restating the idea in other words.**
6. In brainstorming sessions, Tim stresses the importance of separating idea **generation** and idea **evaluation**.

## Online Practice

Click the "Launch" button to open the **online practice**:

