

HOW TO SOLVE PROBLEMS

FASTER, BETTER, SMARTER



CREATIVE IDEAS FOR PRACTICAL RESULTS

SAMPLE CHAPTERS BY LEONARD LANG, PH.D.

Here are two **chapters from this book, along with the table of contents** so you can see how much else is in this book. To download the entire book, click here:

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From *How to Solve Problems*
Brainstorming Do's and Don'ts
10 Things People Say that Stop New Ideas

Brainstorming Do's and Don'ts

Linus Pauling, the two-time Nobel Laureate, said, “**The best way to get a good idea is to get a lot of ideas.**” In other words,--quantity produces quality. Many other inventive and creative people have said similar things. Studies of geniuses support this as well, showing that they don't have a higher percentage of good ideas than the rest of us. They just have more ideas, often quite a lot more.

Yet, I don't find many people fully understand or take advantage of this quantity principal on their own and don't do a great job of it even in group brainstorming where the whole idea is to produce lots of ideas. Instead many of these sessions wind up with the same old solutions.

Here, then, are a few **don'ts and do's** for making sure your group brainstorming sessions really do produce a lot of ideas--so you can wind up with good ones. Many of these ideas also apply to brainstorming on your own as well:

- Don't get stuck in group thinking too early by making the mistake of brainstorming together as a group first.
- Do **brainstorm individually first** so that people don't start by conforming to what the group begins to produce. Even if you think you won't start shaping your ideas around what the group is saying, studies show you will.
- Don't stop as soon as you hit the first good idea. That's probably just the start of your most creative thinking.

- **Do brainstorm up to a predetermined, specific (large) number of ideas or for a specific amount of time** even if you reach a satisfactory idea near the beginning of the process.
- **Don't** limit yourself to practical ideas that might work.
- **Do mention even your craziest ideas** because you never know at that point if something about them can be converted into something useful or stimulate new thinking from others.
- **Don't** reject any ideas until all ideas have been presented.
- **Do finish your brainstorming before going on to evaluating** any of the ideas. Evaluation is a different process that is about seeing what's practical and criticizing problems with ideas. It's the opposite of creative brainstorming.
- **Don't** defer to people who may know more than you do on the topic.
- **Do assume everyone has something to contribute.** In fact, a lack of knowledge about a field can sometimes produce the most original new ideas in that field. That's why some of the best ideas in science come from graduate students who haven't learned yet the "only way" to do something.

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10 Things People Say that Stop New Ideas

No one wants to stop new ideas, but I hear people commonly saying the following things which stop new ideas with almost magical power:

1. We tried something JUST LIKE THAT before, and it didn't work.
2. I heard that so and so tried something JUST LIKE THAT, and it didn't work.
3. Say nothing after an idea is mentioned for discussion, and ideally make it a long silence.
4. Yes, but what about....(and then critique the idea in whatever way is easy and convenient).
5. Sounds good, but how exactly would that work? (This can be a good question, but not when an idea has just been discovered)
6. Great idea, but here's an even better way to do that.
7. What does _____ (fill in the blank with the name of the boss) think about that?
8. That's just dumb (or silly or stupid or ridiculous).
9. Very clever, but now let's get something practical done.
10. Hmm, interesting.....Let's move on.

Sound familiar? Such responses are usually not ill-intentioned, but they certainly generate more silence than problem solving. Fortunately, you and your group can learn a different approach.

First, establish ground rules or holding creativity sessions:

- No critiques during the first portion of any problem solving session, whether officially brainstorming or not. Let everyone know there will be time for all critiques of the ideas (not the person) at a set time later in the meeting.
- Encourage and model thinking crazy ideas. Explain that sometimes the silliest idea has a kernel of value that otherwise would have been missed.
 - For instance, the neighborhood watch program began when someone came up with a totally crazy, impractical solution to make neighborhoods safer by having police officers who had 12 pairs of eyes. But that's what neighborhood watch is about—lots of eyes on the street, and people who can report problems to the police.

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- Best of all is to get used to ways to ask questions to clarify, generate more ideas, and not dismiss ones in their infancy. Here are a few:
 1. Can you tell me what you most like about that idea?
 2. Does anyone have anything fun to build on that?
 3. Hmm, interesting. I heard that ___was the core idea. Did I get that right?
 4. What might Einstein (or any creative person) say about that?
 5. What's a way to make our problem worse? This gets people energized, laughing, and then able to reverse the answers for real solutions.

You wouldn't simply correct a child thinking or playing creatively. Think of new ideas like children, needing encouragement at the early stages of development.

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