

How To Turn Normal People Into Stark, Raving “Ideators”

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PREPARED PARTICIPANTS for a brainstorming session is worth its weight in good ideas. But most participants don't have enough time, and most quick-fix training programs don't work. Here's a new approach. All it takes are four hours and 40 pennies.

Imagine that you're scheduled to facilitate a creative problem-solving session. The good news is that you have been given a team of talented people to work with; the bad news is that they've never been ideation resources, people who form ideas for a specific project.

Some leaders in the field say that you can't start ideation until the team has been through a week of intensive training. Others believe that people are culturally acclimated to brainstorming, so you can train on the run.

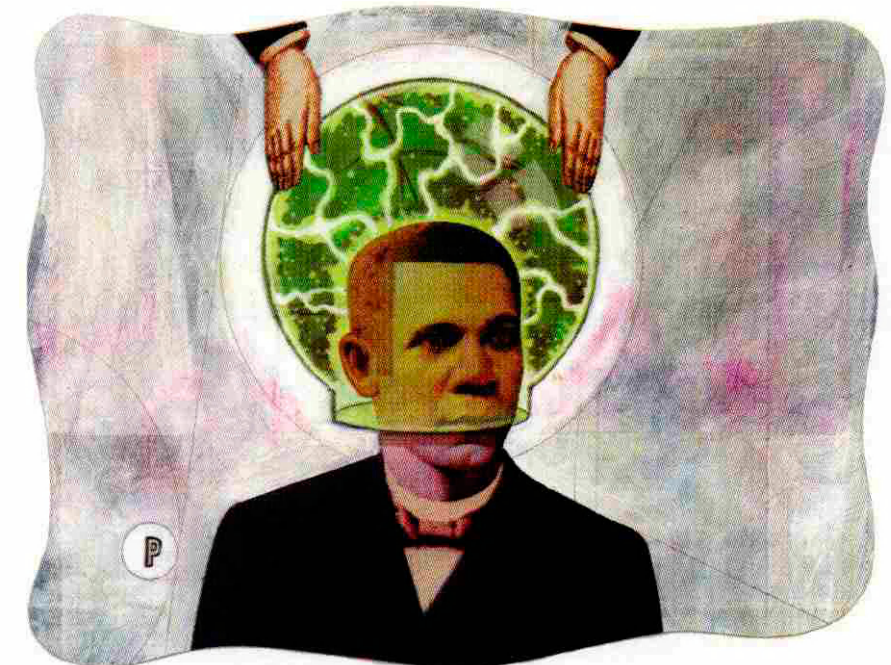
They're both wrong. We've been to the mountain; we've seen the other side. Pre-session preparation is necessary. And unless you're building a long-term team, preparation requires only four hours. That's all you need to develop people's problem sensitivity, internalized how-to knowledge, self-confidence, and excitement for a project—and get participation from key people who can't take off more than an afternoon for training.

To achieve those objectives, you need training built around these elements:

Self discovery. Rather than teach what's important, help participants learn it on their own.

(Relative) comfort. Initially, most people are more comfortable conceptualizing verbally, rather than visually. And most people are more comfortable working alone, initially. Training should progress from high comfort-zone (individual, verbal) exercises to lower comfort-zone (group, visual) activities, with controlled and purposeful growing pains.

Tangible achievement. The training should do more than transfer knowledge. Participants should experience



success after success, ending with one or more high-quality ideas that they didn't believe they could develop.

A penny for your thoughts

A four-hour ideation resource training plan includes these steps:

- ▶ introduction (20 minutes)
- ▶ problem statement and basic principles (10 minutes)
- ▶ individual and pairs ideation (25 minutes for individual, 30 minutes for pairs)
- ▶ sensory expansion (45 minutes)
- ▶ visualization (35 minutes)
- ▶ idea selection and refinement (55 minutes)
- ▶ review (20 minutes).

Step 1: Introduction. Many people, particularly those who don't know each other well, may arrive at ideation training feeling somewhat wary and withdrawn. Your first training task is to broaden their comfort zone by building mutual trust. You can couple the introductions with a fantasy job exercise—such as, “If you could have any job in the world besides the one you have, what would it be?” Follow up with a quick review of the project and training objectives, then answer

participants' initial questions.

Step 2: Problem statement and basic principles. There's extra value in structuring the training around one problem. It helps participants see how making repeated passes at ideation leads to richer ideas and how dividing divergent and convergent activities leads, over time, to breakthrough ideas.

To heighten the sense of fun, position the training as an effort to protect an endangered species, the penny. Tell participants that they can't buy much with a penny and that pennies cause unsightly pocket bulges. Further, the government is considering minting no new pennies. But the penny can be removed from the endangered list if the group can devise ways to renew interest in pennies, such as new uses (making jewelry from them) or improvements (substituting baseball players for Lincoln so that kids will collect pennies).

Posing that problem with a mixture of whimsy and enthusiasm will get participants raring to go. Now, all they need is an idea of what *go* means; they need to know how to ideate. Here's how.

► **Go for quantity.** The more ideas you work with, the more good ideas you are likely to generate by the end of the session.

► **Be open-minded.** Listen openly to every idea—yours and others'. Remember, most great ideas don't arrive full-blown.

► **Build.** Ideation systems work on the principle of layering one idea on another.

Confining the training to those three messages gives participants the best opportunity to learn and internalize the importance of key ideation principles.

Step 3: Individual and pairs ideation.

After presenting the penny problem, ask participants to spend two minutes listing on flipcharts ways to increase demand for the penny. At the end of two minutes, ask them to stop, draw a line under their last idea, and tally the number of ideas.

Discuss the numbers; don't discuss specific ideas yet. Jokingly, ask participants why they think some people came up with more ideas than others. Encourage them to be open-minded and leave their ideas unedited.

Next, ask participants to move to different flipcharts to work in pairs. Ask them to list new ideas that use others' original ideas as stimuli. After five minutes, tell them to stop and draw another line under the last idea. Then, count how many new ideas each pair generated.

Again, follow up with a discussion of why some pairs had more ideas than others. This is a natural place to explain the value of headlining ideas and to reiterate the importance of being open-minded and building on others' ideas.

Step 4: Sensory expansion. Now, the real fun begins. Participants are ready to work in larger groups and with nonverbal stimuli.

Give each person one penny. Ask everyone to list all of the penny's characteristics; challenge them to smell and feel their pennies to discover more traits.

As an excursion at this point, have participants form teams of four. Place their pennies in a bowl with a few extra pennies, then pour out all of the pennies. Test participants' observation skills by challenging them to

identify their own pennies.

After that, combine teams and have them try the same penny-bowl exercise in groups of eight. To their surprise, they will succeed. They will be able to identify their own pennies. And when you ask what they learned from the exercise, their answers may surprise you. Typically, participants say they learn

► the need for intensive involvement in a subject

► the importance of teamwork

► the power of observation.

Many say, "I'm becoming attached to my penny."

Continue the ideation exercise by having participants work individually again, using their pennies and lists of penny characteristics as stimuli to think of new ideas to save the penny. Next, have them swap lists and work in new teams of four, using others' ideas to build and record new ideas.

After 15 minutes, ask participants to draw a line under the last idea, then explore what they learned from the exercise. Emphasize the fun and value of using all of the senses, and the positive dynamics of working in a larger group.

Break.

Step 5: Visualization. End the idea generation by playing soothing music and giving each participant four or five unrelated graphics, such as art images (no pennies). Instruct them to use the visuals and music to stimulate new save-the-penny ideas. After five to 10 minutes, put participants into new teams of four so they can bond with different team members. Ask the teams to build on their newest ideas and record the results.

After 15 minutes, ask the teams to draw a line under the last idea and discuss what they learned. They will discover that tapping into nonverbal senses can lead to more and different kinds of ideas.

Step 6: Idea selection and refinement. The first two-and-a-half hours teaches participants how to generate ideas and enjoy it. The last 90 minutes helps them discover how this mixed bag of ideas turns into high-quality recommendations. It lets them see that the process works, and helps convince them that they are good at it. Piece of cake.

Begin by forming new pairs from members of the four-person teams (more new bonding). Swap lists, and have each pair select an idea that is the most feasible and has the most potential impact on penny demand. Ask the pairs to identify (by the lines on the flipcharts) when in the session ideas evolved. Not surprising to you (but surprising to them), many of the more creative ideas will be from the later exercises and has the most potential impact on penny demand. Ask the pairs to identify (by the lines on the flipcharts) the importance of building on ideas and making a constant effort throughout a project.

To help participants refine their ideas, ask the pairs to develop and list all of the consumer advantages and benefits of the idea they chose. Then, instruct them to identify the one advantage or benefit they think is most important.

Next, ask each pair to create a billboard that presents their idea clearly and persuasively. Remind them that a billboard has to be readable from a thousand feet away at 60 mph, so it can't be wordy. With that as a prologue, turn them loose. Twenty minutes later, ask the pairs to present their billboards. You and the participants may be astounded by just how good the ideas are.

Step 7: Review. Conclude the ideation training with this question to the group: "So, what have you learned?" Use group discussion as an opportunity to review how ideation works and what people need to do to make it work. Last, ask participants if they have any questions. The most frequently asked question at this point is usually, "Can I take my penny home?"

("Save the Penny" is based on an exercise created by Irv Merson of Merson/Greener, a facilitation consultancy in Tarrytown, New York.)

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