# Brainstorming Deluxe

By Greg Bachman

Of course you know how brainstorming works. You recruit a group, fling ideas onto flipchart sheets, withhold your criticism, circle the consensus-best idea, congratulate yourselves, and go to lunch. A few days later, the documented ideas arrive on your desk. What do you see? Perhaps the kinds of ideas that beg you to ask, "What was I thinking when I led the group to come up with *those* ideas?" Or, "Who really thinks we can implement that?!"

Recall the brainstorming sessions you've led or sat through: You probably remember some real doozies. Like the time the room was reeking of group genius and Lou shook his head and evaporated two hours of brilliant work by saying, "That's not going to fly around here." Or the time everyone agreed that manufacturing needed a good dose of process re-engineering—and three missed bonuses later, people are still bickering about what went wrong. Admittedly, brainstorming allows genius to break through. But, it's often accompanied by well-intentioned ineptitude. Is there a better way to brainstorm? One that connects more ideas, yet tests them along the way?

Value-added brainstorming puts ideas into five segments of a compounding process. It structures the flow of ideas so that each segment of ideas adds value to the next.

**Step 1. Demand:** List ideas about what's causing the problem you are here to solve.

The first step in the value-added brainstorming process is to list all of the reasons people think the brainstorming session has been called. In other words, considering the problem you're there to solve, what could be the reasons this problem exists? This step is often skipped. Quite often, the person running the meeting assumes that everyone in the room agrees about why the problem exists. Therefore, members don't articulate to the group their private speculations about the cause. Right away, the brainstorming process is off to a false start, because the reasons for the problem aren't out in the open, or aren't open to

analysis and value building.

One feature of this step is that it can unearth causes that haven't been recognized as driving the problem. After all, something is allowing the problem to exist; something is feeding it, protecting it, perhaps even benefiting from it. What pop up during this step are ideas that express everything from conventional wisdom to conspiracy theory ("Our competitor has a mole in our company"). The benefit of looking at these often-unimagined causes, far afield as some of them might sound, is that they will help you churn out lots of additional ideas as you move through the value-added process.

**Step 2. Objectives:** List what you want

## How to Create a Solution Resource Catalogue

As part of your group's work, create a Solution Resource Catalogue with many sections. Each section should include a category of solutions, which can be real-world or made up, serious or off-the-wall. The catalogue serves as a go-to guide for finding solutions within your company. Organize it into sections such as

- ❑ In-House Software
- ❑ Off-the-Shelf Software
- ❑ Serious Hardware
- ❑ Gizmos and Gimmicks
- ❑ Policies
- ❑ Resumes I'd Like to Receive
- ❑ Perks That Produce Results
- ❑ Cultural Changes
- ❑ Dead If You Do This
- ❑ Promotable If You Do This
- ❑ Stuff We'd Like but Don't Have
- ❑ Things Not Yet Invented
- ❑ Products We Wish We Had
- ❑ Processes That Could Save Us Money
- ❑ Goals I Wish We Had
- ❑ Things to Protect Us From the Competition
- ❑ Stuff We'd Like to Know About Our Customers
- ❑ Things That If Our Customers Knew Would Sell More of Our Products
- ❑ New Products and Services That Would Put Our Current Products and

your ideas to do, by describing the outputs that meet the demand determined in step 1.

Step 2 begins after the group appears to have exhausted all of the primary, secondary, and tertiary reasons for the problem. List the objectives you want to accomplish by solving it. These are the outcomes: the finished process and the products. Set aside the managerial tendency to simplify by coping with only a single objective. Instead, invite the group to create different ways to phrase the objectives. What will happen is that the objectives will be transformed from a conventional statement of how to handle the problem to a statement that acknowledges the possible causes and conditions that are the real sources. Step 1 (demand) catalogues all of the conditions that control the problem; the second step (objectives) catalogues all of the ways you can benefit from finding a solution. By understanding the many possible solutions, the richness of the value-added brainstorming process begins to unfold.

**Step 3. Resources:** List all possible sources of models for solutions; then, list ideas based on those models.

At first, participants will propose solutions: "How about if you…?" or "You know what you might be able to do?" They're anxious to cut to the chase and may be impatient with the five-step process. After all, you invited them to come to the brainstorming session to contribute their best ideas, and now you keep throwing these additional steps in their way. Some people will get frustrated, but others will see the possibilities and advantages.

All you're asking for now is a list of places you could go to find solutions. They could be examples from other organizations, but they must be ideas about how the objectives on your list deal with what the group has determined to be the possible causes.

For example, you might elicit opinions about how ideas from a different environment might apply to your situation. If you sell business-to-business, then how would a retail solution apply? If you're in a technology business, could you apply a process from biology? If you're in the ad-

## The Value-Added Scramble

Sometimes you have to surrender control of a brainstorming session. Your group gets rowdy. One person doesn't want to follow the rules, and disobedience becomes contagious. And most of the gang would rather be just about anywhere else, so they make you compensate by letting them dictate the terms. Or the five-step process appears to be clunky and they're in a mood to be funky, to give you some lip and shoot from the hip.

There's a way to deal with that and still gain the benefits. First, make sure you have one flipchart page posted on the wall and clearly labeled for each segment of the session: Demand, Objectives, Resources, Processes, and Communication. Then, when you're searching for all possible causes of the problem and one of the wild bunch throws out a solution, immediately go over to processes and note it. Then, return to the demands flipchart and continue. Someone offers a communication idea? Zoom over to the communication chart and note it right away. Then, return to the chart at which you were working.

At first, it appears that a disconnected hodgepodge of ideas is being slammed up on the paper here, there, and everywhere. But once you get enough ideas up there—no matter what order they're shouted out—the value-added system is going to become apparent. That great-sounding idea for a solution that someone insisted you note while you were still logging demand causes? By the time the second or third objective is drafted, it's clear that the early solution was superficial, a near miss at best. But others who built on it benefited from having it as a basis.

Whether you do value-added brainstorming in a linear mode or in a scramble, you'll be able to link a whole new host of ideas that leverage your solution into a position that sets a standard for future brainstorming sessions.

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vertising business, how about ideas that one of your clients uses? The goal of this step is to plumb participants' imaginations for idea sources, from science fiction to gourmet cooking. Never fear: You'll get as many great ideas as you would from traditional brainstorming. And because you're asking for solutions outside of your conventional procedures, you might get more ideas than you expect.

The temptation to rush to answers is so powerful in brainstorming that demand-based solutions are often ignored. When an objective is preordained, the solutions become tailored to the stated objective and may be rendered useless by an implementation process that's left to the grapevine to communicate. Using step 3 to generate ideas by looking at ways other kinds of organizations solve problems, you begin to find solutions outside of your usual repertoire. That approach builds on the objectives and tests ideas against demand, and thus adds value to the process ideas that follow.

After completing step 3, give your group time to breathe and review:
❑ Walk them through the list of ideas from step 1, and reiterate the ideas suggested as objectives.
❑ Then, ask the group whether the ideas generated as resources capture ways to deal with the conditions that are driving the problem.
❑ Ask whether the resources are responsive to the objectives.
❑ Ask whether people can see how their resources ideas support one or more objectives.
❑ Ask participants whether their resources ideas will alter the conditions causing the problem.

The review process gives the group an opportunity to make a few more visual and cognitive connections between the cause of the problem and the resources needed to solve it.

**Step 4. Processes:** List ways to turn the previous ideas into methods, plans, products, and services that will meet your objectives.

Just as gaining a fuller understanding of all of the possible step 1 conditions produced a longer list of possible and more powerful objectives—more powerful because they deal with root conditions—you'll add value to the brainstorming process by listing all of the ways you can apply the resources to meeting the objectives. You do that by listing process ideas. Processes are concepts that take resources ideas and shape them into practical ways they can be implemented.

You'll discover that some participants who were nonresponsive during the previous steps are now stirring. These are the go-to folks. They have respect for the big-picture people who were talking during steps 1 through 3, but now the go-to folks are on more familiar turf. They've been bugging you with their frowns and disapproving looks. Now, with their ability to focus on details and construct viable processes from the smallest ideas, this formerly silent bunch is adding value. Further, they're demonstrating how the process step adds value to the preceding steps: The processes build on and link the resources ideas that responded to the objectives that dealt with the demands that caused the problem.

**Step 5. Communication:** List possible ways to transfer your ideas to people who might value them.

A feeling of satisfaction comes over the group. Their work is done. They're proud. And they're exhausted mentally. But there's one thing left to do: If their solution will add value to the organization, then they must communicate it. Communication transfers the value of the solutions (processes) to the rest of the organization and its stakeholders.

Ordinarily, a brainstorming session ends with the process discussion. Communication is assigned to the manager or vice president of the area most affected; in other words, it's delegated to authority. But authority is very busy. It usually gets paid to minimize risk, and usually minimizes risk by minimizing change. That's why the brilliant ideas that bloom in brainstorming sessions wilt when taken out of the greenhouse; they're not ready for an environment so unlike the permissive, just-do-it atmosphere of the idea session.

Value-added brainstorming requires participants to generate ideas about how to communicate everything about the solution. Participants must test whether what is said and shown will deal with the causes of the problem (demand), meet the objectives, make the best use of the resources ideas, and help implement the

processes effectively.

By the time you wrap up your value-added brainstorming session with the communication ideas, you can be confident that you have looked at more causes, more objectives, more possible solutions, more implementation concepts, and more ways to communicate the value of your ideas than anyone could have imagined. And you've added to your own skill set.

The first time you guide a group through value-added brainstorming, they'll be confused about where you're going and why you want to take everyone there. It won't be long, however, before the group begins to see the benefits.

The problem that conventional wisdom says is caused by a single factor turns out to be caused by several factors; those factors are controlled by several other conditions. The problem is more complex than anticipated. Learning that might be a downer, but it's better to get the bad news right away than six months and a million dollars later.

Another benefit of value-added brainstorming appears shortly after you write the first objective on the flipchart. Most people won't think of it as the first of several possible objectives; to them, it's *the* objective. After all, the most senior person in the room probably formulated it. Or perhaps it was stated in the memo inviting them to the session.

In either case, just as you're scribing the end of the objective statement and vowing to take a handwriting course, you'll hear a voice—timid, perhaps, but nonetheless iconoclastic:

"You know," it says to your back, "I was just noticing something." And then, the person points out that the objective doesn't deal with some of the real root causes of the problem effectively.

"I think you need another objective."

And the value-added process is off and running.

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