

Directed brainstorming

Pyramid thinking can, of course, be done by an individual manager, but it can also be done by a group.

Perhaps it is most effective as a group activity, because the interaction can produce the best action proposals and result in a mutual commitment to actually implementing the proposals.

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This is crucially important.

Ideas without implementation are sterile seeds that never grow.

This book has repeatedly stressed the necessity for fast, decisive action.

Unfortunately, actions that affect the future and those based on uncertain, often obscure and controversial clues tend to be postponed.

It is easier to respond to loudly resounding fire alarms.

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What's needed is a formal group process for fostering ideas and implementing them next Monday morning.

Directed brainstorming is such a process.

It has been tested over a period of years with managers in various enterprises of all sizes and diversities of fields.

The process is practical; it produces good, often extraordinary results.

Here's how it works:

Prerequisites

Assemble five to seven managers in a comfortably furnished living room with a semicircular sofa.

Disconnect the telephone.

Provide four easels with plenty of pads, masking tape, and felt-tipped multicolored markers.

Have lots of coffee and soft drinks.

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The purpose of this environment is to stimulate a free exchange of ideas and opinions.

More positive results can be achieved in one or two days of intensive concentration than in months of conventional procedures and meetings.

The moderator must remain quite neutral and noncontroversial but be able to ask penetrating questions and direct traffic.

The CEO should be present but must try to behave as an equal participant, not the all-knowing, dominating authority figure.

Phase 1: Factors

The participants name and list the many factors that have potential direct or indirect effects on a chosen topic—a problem or opportunity, a key platitude, or any top-of-the-pyramid key word. Examples:

- Diversification
- New products
- Automation
- Motivation
- Organization
- Entrepreneurship
- Going public

- Going private
- Government regulations
- Executive succession

There should be at least 50 to 100 factors thrown in and jotted on the easel pads.

The rules forbid discussion during the listing of the factors; anything goes.

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If participants fail to come up with forces that are affecting the subject at hand, one of two possible reasons may be responsible:

1. The managers do not feel free to express themselves frankly and openly—indicating a one-man rule and dictatorial culture.
2. They genuinely can't think of many factors relating to the topic—perhaps symptoms of an inbred and shallow intellectual level. However, even such negatives can provide a valuable insight to the CEO or the highest executive present.

Phase 2: Potential Impact

With several easel pads filled with positive or negative factors affecting a given topic, the participants can now engage in a spirited discussion of the relative impact of each of the factors.

For instance, the ratings can vary from a -3 to a +3.

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Differences of opinion should not only be heard but encouraged.

Constructive conflict is healthy and is part of the process.

It's particularly worthwhile when one manager rates a factor a high minus while another judges it to be a high plus.

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Critics of directed brainstorming argue that such discussions are often based on feelings and intuition rather than on hard facts; thus, any conclusions reached are dangerous because they may contradict reality.

To avoid that possibility, the managers chosen should be knowledgeable in their fields.

In addition, a prudent CEO can have the conclusions of the brainstorming meeting checked for accuracy of facts and data by an independent source.

Phase 3: Priority of Factors

After the factors are rated on their relative impact and a consensus is reached on each subject, the next step is additional refinement.

The top-rated positive factors and negative factors must now be ranked according to their impact and importance.

This requires careful analysis and even more thoughtful discussion.

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The final result is a specific priority list that becomes the basis for selecting actions to remedy or exploit the situation.

Such a rating is clearly very sensitive and must be decided upon with plenty of input and consideration from all participants.

Phase 4: Possible Actions

The directed brainstorming process enters a new phase by asking the participants to make Monday morning implementation proposals on the priority items that were selected in phase 3:

- What new and different innovative actions could be undertaken?

- Why weren't they started before?
- Are there other, underlying reasons for not acting on items given such a high priority by the company's top executives?
- Are there policies that must be changed?
- Is the organization structure faulty? Was the problem ignored? Are opportunities being lost? Why, why, why?
- What additional actions should be taken to ensure that top-priority factors are handled as part of the normal course of business operations?

Phase 4 should produce a list of potential actions to cover items on the priority list and additional, often more important, actions to improve the basic decision-making structure of the company—such as reorganization, delegation, powers reserved, redefinition of responsibilities, change of objectives, and business priorities.

Phase 5: Priority of Actions

The group now has before it a menu of action proposals.

The final stage of the process is to select, in strict priority order, the key actions to be initiated next Monday morning.

Frank discussion and constructive conflict are again desirable.

The availability of funds and human resources must be considered.

Previous priorities may have to be revised.

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The crucial point of the session finally emerges.

What are the three or four absolutely most important actions that must be undertaken within the business, starting Monday morning?

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Directed brainstorming is effective because it reduces general platitudes to practical, down-to-earth, "what must be done Monday morning" actions.

The listing of those actions, also in priority order, becomes a de facto strategic plan for the corporation.

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The key to this management blueprint is its incompleteness.

Only the important or, even better, absolutely most important, issues should be considered and resolved.

The others will take care of themselves.

Top-management attention should not be diverted by whether to plant begonias or petunias in the company parking lot—or even by the amount of office space that may be needed 5 years hence.

These matters will be resolved somehow; they are not essential issues, even if administrative bureaucrats claim otherwise.

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On the other hand, once a top-priority list of issues is prepared, every sentence made must be cross-referenced by a Monday morning action proposal.

Otherwise, directed brainstorming remains sterile and has no significance to the business.

The most important executive question to any statement of a problem or opportunity is "What are we going to do about it?"

You know when!

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The process works.

Its simplicity is deceiving; the results are often extraordinary.