Worksheets - Meetings (4): Brainstorming and evaluating

Reading
Look at the following phrases. Four of them are the rules of successful brainstorming and six of them are important criticisms. With a partner, discuss which phrases are rules and which are criticisms, and what each phrase might mean.

Then read the text. Write one phrase in each gap.

- **blocking**
- **combine and improve ideas**
- **evaluation apprehension**
- **focus on quantity**
- **free rider problem**

- **illusion of group productivity**
- **personal contribution**
- **social matching effect**
- **welcome unusual ideas**
- **withhold criticism**

Finally, without looking back at the text, try to remember as much as you can about each phrase above. Discuss your ideas with a partner.

The problem with brainstorming
Brainstorming is one of the most popular techniques used in meetings to generate ideas for solving a specific problem. Alex Osborn, the inventor of the term 'Brainstorming', established four rules.

- Firstly, it's important to _____ **(1)**. Write everything down, the more ideas, the better.
- Secondly, participants need to _____ **(2)**. Never criticise another person's idea during the brainstorming session, as it will prevent people from being creative. There's plenty of time for criticism in the evaluation stage later.
- Thirdly, we should _____ **(3)**. Try to challenge your assumptions and ask '*what if* …?' questions.
- Finally, try to _____ **(4)**. This is the real power of brainstorming: person A's crazy idea, which would never work in practice, may get person B thinking about a similar idea which might just work. Even better, person A's crazy idea and person C's crazy idea can be combined, taking the best parts of each. So instead of saying '*no*' or '*yes, but* …' we need to train ourselves to say '*yes, and* …'.

A successful brainstorming session can be really useful, but is it always as effective as it could be? Researchers have identified many possible problems, all of which suggest that it is far from perfect.

First of all, there's the _____ **(5)**. This comes from the idea of travelling by bus without a ticket. Why should I bother to buy a ticket when the bus is going anyway? From a selfish point of view, it's in my interest to ride for free and let others pay for their tickets. The same goes for a brainstorming meeting: why I should I make the effort to be creative when all the benefits, and the praise for good ideas, go to the group? From a selfish point of view, it's in my interest to let everyone else do all the work. Even if people don't think in such simple terms, it can be demotivating to keep generating ideas when you know you will not be praised or rewarded personally for them, especially if you don't have especially a strong sense of being part of a team.

A related problem is called the _____ **(6)** Observers have noted that we try to match our behaviour to the behaviour of other people in the room. So if everyone else is sitting silently, or focusing only on sensible ideas, we feel pressure to do the same. Of course, the social matching effect can have the opposite effect, by encouraging quieter or less creative people to contribute as freely as other participants, but this positive effect tends to be weaker than the negative effect, for the simple reason that it's easier to contribute less.

There's also evidence that people are bad at judging the level of their _____ **(7)** to a brainstorming session. In one experiment, for example, a group of four participants each believed they had contributed around 36% of the ideas at a recent brainstorming session, even though that it mathematically impossible.

A fourth potential problem is _____ **(8)**, or being worried about what other people will think or say about your ideas. It's one thing to avoid openly criticising other people's ideas, but it's much more difficult to avoid all signs of judgement. People may express criticism with a simple facial expression, a slight laugh or even a pause between hearing an idea and responding. And even if nobody is negative in any way, it's still difficult to accept that nobody is thinking negative thoughts about your crazy idea.

A much more serious problem is called _____ **(9)**. This happens when only one person at a time is allowed to talk. If that person talks for too long, you may forget your own idea, or decide not to express it when you finally get your chance. This problem probably happens all the time: ideas come and go every second, but it is terribly easy to get distracted, especially when we are listening politely to a colleague expressing his or her own idea.

Finally, there is a problem called the _____ **(10)**, where participants think the meeting is more effective than it really is. For example, it can be very difficult to judge when the meeting's objectives have been met: how many ideas should be on the board? How many of those ideas need to be serious proposals, as compared to lists of random words and thoughts? Without concrete criteria for assessing success, groups tend to believe they've achieved their goal far too soon.

In other words, instead of making people more creative, the act of listening to each other's ideas may actually make them try less hard, withhold their own ideas and give up too soon.

Useful phrases for making suggestions

A	B
• This might sound crazy, but … • Just thinking aloud for a moment, but … • I've just had an idea. • It probably wouldn't work in practice, but … • I haven't thought this through yet, but … • You've just reminded me of something. • Just to build on that idea, … • I wonder if we could combine your idea with something that was said earlier. • In an ideal world, …	• Why don't we …? • I suppose we could … • How about …? • I think we should … • We could always … • I don't suppose we could … • Wouldn't it be nice if we … • What if we …? • I wonder if it would be possible to … • It might be possible to … • Could we …?

1. Look at the phrases in column A for introducing ideas in a brainstorming session. Which phrases would you use to introduce very unusual ideas? Which phrases would you use to relate your idea to previous suggestions?

2. Look at the phrases in column B. Which verb form comes after each phrase: an infinitive (e.g. *try*), an *–ing* form (e.g. *trying*) or a past tense (e.g. *tried*)? Which phrases suggest the speaker more confident or less confident about their ideas?

3. Work alone. Make five suggestions about how to improve brainstorming, based on the criticisms in the text. Use one phrase from A and one from B in each sentence (e.g. *This might sound crazy, but I wonder if it might be possible to …*).

a. _____.

b. _____.

c. _____.
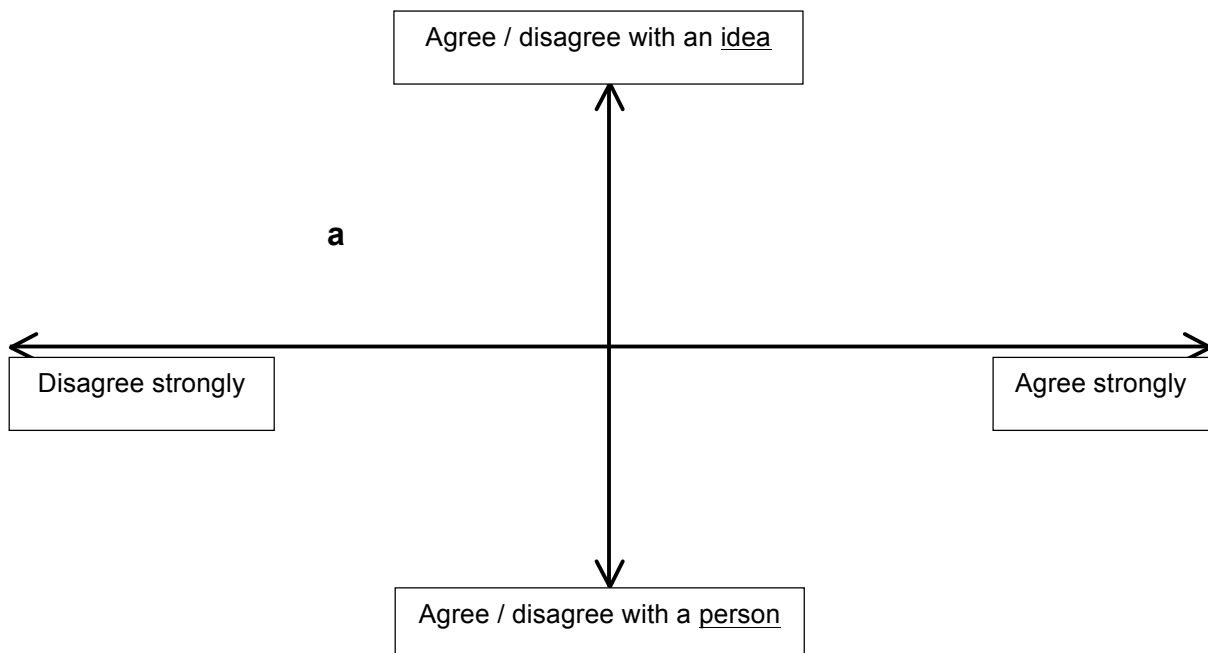
d. _____.

e. _____.

Practice
Role-play a brainstorming meeting on the subject of how to improve brainstorming meetings in your organisation. You can use your sentences from 5 to get you started, but hopefully you'll also get lots of new ideas during the meeting.

Useful phrases for evaluating ideas

Look at these phrases for evaluating ideas.

a. I don't think it would work.
b. That's a brilliant idea.
c. It might just work.
d. Absolutely.
e. Maybe. I'm not sure.
f. No, I don't think so.
g. I'm not keen at all.
h. I'm not really convinced.
i. I think it needs a lot more thought.
j. That's not a bad idea.
k. Yes, I think you're right.
l. Are you sure?
m. I'm really not happy about it.
n. Well, I agree up to a point.
o. Well, yes and no.
p. This idea has potential, but it's not quite there yet.
q. I think this is just what we need.

Decide on the best position on the graph for each phrase, as in the example.

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              ┌──────────────────────────────┐
              │ Agree / disagree with an idea │
              └──────────────────────────────┘
                            ▲
                            │
        a                   │
                            │
  ◄─────────────────────────┼─────────────────────────►
 ┌──────────────────┐       │        ┌──────────────────┐
 │ Disagree strongly │      │        │  Agree strongly  │
 └──────────────────┘       │        └──────────────────┘
                            │
                            ▼
              ┌──────────────────────────────┐
              │ Agree / disagree with a person │
              └──────────────────────────────┘
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Practice (1)
Now use the phrases to evaluate the ideas you generated in your brainstorming session. Use the 'ideas' phrases for expressing your opinions, and the 'people' phrases to respond to other people's opinions.

Practice (2)
Use the procedures you decided on in Practice (1) to role-play a brainstorming meeting to solve one of the following problems:
• What is the most effective way we can save £1 million from our costs?
• What is the quickest way we can make £1 million from a new website?
• What new product can we manufacture in order to make a fortune very quickly?