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**MAN:** This is The Public Speaker, quick and dirty tips for improving your communication skills, with your host, Lisa B. Marshall.

**ANAND LAKSHMANAN:** Hi, Lisa. This is Anand Lakshmanan from Dallas, Texas, and I was wondering if you would make an episode on the dos and don'ts for effectively brainstorming solutions. Thank you.

**LISA B. MARSHALL:** Anand, thanks for your question. Turns out there is a significant amount of research on brainstorming, but most of it relies on virgin brainstormers-- usually college students who are asked to solve simple problems, like come up with creative uses for a red brick.

I've found that the dynamics of brainstorming in a professional environment can be quite different, mostly because I think the problems and the solutions are way more complex, and they're critical to the success of the participants. So instead, I'm going to draw on my hands-on experience to answer this question.

In a way, I was spoiled because my very first exposure to intensive team problem solving was at General Electric. I was part of the very first team that participated in GE's now famous-- and some say legendary-- WorkOut program. WorkOut is GE's highly successful technique for solving organizational problems very rapidly. The first part of the GE process definitely includes brainstorming techniques, but the overall process also includes solution presentations, decisions, and rapid implementation.

Over the years, I've been a participant, a leader, and an observer of many so-called brainstorming sessions that were, let's just say, not as effective. So here are some quick and dirty tips that are important for effective brainstorming.

Before the session, you'll need to think carefully about the problem. Be sure what you're tackling is really the problem and not just a symptom. Also think carefully about word choice. You might consider adjusting the scope or maybe choosing different verbs. For example, "how can we involve customers in our upcoming conference" might become "how can we actively engage customers in our programs."

Perhaps the most important part of homework is to ask participants to prepare. They need to understand both the problem and the brainstorming process ahead of time. Before the

meeting, you can send out homework that describes the process and encourages participants to start researching the problem, and also to come to the meeting with a list of ideas. I've noticed that some people are great at coming up with ideas on the fly, but there's others like me who need more time to marinate.

After the session, there should also be homework. Some of the best ideas come to people after they've had time to digest the ideas that came up during the session. In my experience, both the individual and group work together leads to the best results.

Another important factor that heavily influences the outcome is the mix of participants. What's my advice? Choose wisely.

First, get rid of the boss or any authority figure. Every person needs to feel comfortable and encouraged to present ideas. You don't want participants to be concerned about saying or doing the wrong thing in front of the boss. The boss can introduce the session but should only return at the end of the process when he or she is asked to make the implementation decisions.

Next, you need someone who is a creative thinking facilitator. Not just any facilitator, but a brainstorming facilitator. Most general facilitators, they know how to cut off the criticism, ensure full participation, and keep the team on track.

But creative thinking facilitation is a skill. It takes months or sometimes years to master. And good facilitators can nurture the creativity by using thinking tools.

For example, creativity can be inspired by guiding the team to think about individual characteristics of the problem one at a time, or by using tools such as reversed assumptions, random words, or a morphological matrix. In my experience, this is an area where many organizations go wrong. Often, I see a line manager as the facilitator.

First, no one wants to be wrong in front of their boss. Second, the line manager usually isn't trained in creative thinking. And third, which is perhaps the most common issue, bosses tend to habitually evaluate ideas, which of course is counterproductive during idea generation.

As you probably know, a central principle of brainstorming is postponing judgment. I think judgment frequently happens when the boss acts as the facilitator. So many times I've heard a boss facilitator immediately say, oh, we don't have budget for that, or there's no way a

resource will be approved for that, or we tried that before and it didn't work.

In fact, a popular metaphor used to describe that type of team problem solving is "driving with the brakes on." Allowing judgment during brainstorming isn't effective for idea generation. It just shouldn't happen. Sometimes I even suggest the participants throw crunched-up paper balls at anybody who makes judgments during this part of the process. It acts as a reminder, and it also keeps the mood light and creative.

Next, it's important to keep the size of the group workable, about four to seven people. If the team is dysfunctional, smaller groups may work better. However, if your team is highly functional, you could possibly go up to 12 people. But I wouldn't go any higher than that because it just encourages social loafing. That's the social psychology term for team slackers.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, be sure participants have diverse backgrounds and experiences. In the book *How Breakthroughs Happen*, Hargadon argues that innovation occurs when isolated groups integrate previously unrelated viewpoints and technologies to resolve new problems. I think that's true.

If you want successful sessions, consider inviting people from other departments, perhaps even customers, vendors, advisors. You might be surprised by their contribution.

So there you have it, the dos and don'ts for effective brainstorming. However, I think it's very important to remember that brainstorming is not a panacea. It's only the first step in a longer process. After the ideas are generated, other tools and techniques are necessary to evaluate and implement the ideas.

And, very importantly, the culture of the organization needs to be conducive and supportive of the entire creative process. After the ideas are generated, teams still need rapid decision making and support in order to create truly innovative solutions.

This is Lisa B. Marshall. Passionate about communication, your success is my business. For those of you that would like to learn more, I included some information books, websites, and tools. Visit the Public Speaker home page, and click on the links in the Resource section.

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If you've got a question, please don't hesitate to ask. Really!

**MAN:** If you have questions about how to communicate better at work, leave a voicemail at 206-350-7970. Or email [publicspeaker@quickanddirtytips.com](mailto:publicspeaker@quickanddirtytips.com). Sign up for Lisa's newsletter, or get information about speeches and workshops, by visiting [lisabmarshall.com](http://lisabmarshall.com).

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