IS ONLINE OR IN-PERSON MORE CREATIVE?

BY SUSAN ROBERTSON

T he short answer? **BOTH. Or NEITHER**. It's solely dependent on how the meeting is structured and managed.

A recent study found that online interactions result in less creativity than face to face. The reason: when online, people mostly stare at the screen, rather than letting their eyes wander around, which sparks more divergent thought. But the flaw with this study was that the conditions that actually result in creative thinking were not set — not in the online nor the in-person experiments. So, even though the in-person interactions were slightly more creative, neither were very creative at all, in the absolute.

Effective creative thinking requires adherence to specific guidelines. If done casually, without guidelines, it won't be effective regardless of online or in person.

10 Rules for Brainstorming Success — In Any Environment.

1

Free them from the fear. It's very difficult for people to share ideas if they're concerned about negative consequences. A climate that helps people get past the fear is critical. One key principle is to prohibit any evaluation (even positive evaluation) during the idea generation phase. All evaluation occurs only after idea generation is complete.

2

Use the power of the group. Build, combine and create new ideas in the moment. Don't just collect ideas that people have already had. The building and combining is where the magic happens. Break up into pairs or small groups to encourage even more building and combining.

3

Get outside stimulus. Asking the same people to sit in the same place and review the same information won't result in exciting new ideas. Talk to your customers, talk to other experts, explore what other industries are doing. Have the in-person meeting in a park or museum. If online, mail everyone some dollar-store toys in advance, or play music or show unusual pictures.

4

Encourage the crazy. Something often heard at the beginning of a brainstorming: "Every idea is a good idea," followed by a collective eye roll because no one believes it. While it's not true that every idea is a practical idea, it is true that every idea can offer useful stimulus for additional ideas. Sometimes ideas thrown in as jokes can be the spark that leads to new direction and a winning idea. So allow, encourage and use every idea, even if only for creative fodder.

5

It's a numbers game. The more "at bats" you have, the more likely you are to hit a home run. Drive for quantity. Ensure the session is long enough to generate lots. If you only spend 10 minutes, don't expect great results.

6

Laugh a lot. Humor stimulates creativity, so let it happen. One easy way — have everyone introduce themselves by answering a fun or silly question. Here's one used in a session in December — "What's something you DON'T need more of for the holidays?" The resulting answers were hilarious, and some even started sparking real ideas!

7

Homework is required. Both individual and group efforts are critical for success. Insist on individual preparation. Ensure everyone knows the goal and ask them to do some homework in advance.

8

It's not casual. Effective brainstorming requires skillful facilitation, which is a different set of skills from managing other meeting types. There must be a designated facilitator who is NOT the primary problem owner. The role of the facilitator is to objectively manage the process. Ideally, the facilitator should be someone who has no stake in the outcome and can remain neutral to all content. Designate a facilitator far enough in advance that the person has time to fully plan the session, and potentially to study up on how to do it well.

9

If it looks like a duck, but doesn't act like a duck, it's not a duck. If you can't, or don't intend to, follow the guidelines for successful brainstorming, then don't call it brainstorming. For example, a meeting that just becomes a stage for one person to spout their opinions isn't useful. And if a brainstorming is not organized and structured appropriately, everyone will feel how ineffective it is, and they'll be sure to skip your next session. So, either set up for success, or don't bother.

Whether in person or online, creativity happens when the correct conditions are set. If you're doing it casually, without guidelines and without skillful facilitation, it may not be tremendously effective. However, with appropriate focus on the process and environment, and by following these rules, you can effectively generate creative solutions in any setting. ✪

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10

You're not done until you decide.
Everyone has been in this situation; it's the end of a brainstorming session, a long list of ideas has been created, and someone volunteers to type up the list. And… that's it. There's no action, or at least none that we're aware of. It's demotivating to spend time and energy generating ideas only to feel they went nowhere. Plan time for selecting and prioritizing the ideas during the session. Spend at least an equal amount of time on converging as you do on diverging. Yes, you read that right. If you generate ideas for an hour, also spend at least an hour on selecting, clarifying, and planning. If you leave with a huge list of nebulous, potential ideas, that's not success. The outcome should be a short list of clear ideas and a plan for action.