



HeiterConnect, Inc.

MiniConnect Series: Electronic Brainstorming

November 8, 2004. Presented by: Kevin P. Micalizzi, HeiterConnect, Inc.

Overview

“Electronic brainstorming” is a method of shared problem-solving including the spontaneous contribution of ideas from all members of a group by use of electronic devices. It’s helping generate ideas when they can’t be in a room together. With electronic brainstorming, we lose the visual cues we rely on when working face-to-face. This makes it difficult to ensure full participation and facilitate the free flow of ideas.

Virtual Teaming Principles

The two core principles of virtual teaming that are most relevant to electronic brainstorming are: 1. Make the implicit explicit; 2. Slow down to speed up. By leveraging these principles in the planning and facilitating of our brainstorming sessions, we can make the entire process run smoothly and improve the quality of ideas generated while building solid relationships with our virtual teams.

1. Make the implicit explicit

In a co-located situation, it is far easier for us to gauge our reactions and behaviors based on those around us. We learn quickly whether or not we can join meetings late or multi-task during a meeting. In the virtual space, team members have fewer cues to rely on. We need to create operating agreements and protocols so things that would be implied in our co-located teams, become explicit for our virtual teams.

2. Slow down to speed up

With all the pressures on our projects and teams today, we often feel compelled to charge forward. Slow down to speed up means taking the time up front to make sure things are set up properly. For instance, if we take the time to define when status reports need to be turned in, how they are to be sent, and what they include, we reduce the possibility of re-work being required and create more time for us in the end.

Brainstorming Steps

Step 1. Prepare

In preparing for our brainstorming session, we need to first clarify the challenge we want to address, then any constraints we must work with. For instance, if we need to brainstorm on methods for improving the process to get our product to market, our constraints may include regulatory guidelines. Once we know the challenge and constraints, we must choose and learn the technology we will use. If you will be brainstorming using teleconference and web conferencing technology, you must make sure you and the participants are comfortable using the technology.

Brainstorming Steps:

1. Prepare
2. Generate Ideas
3. Organize
4. Select
5. Debrief

The loss of visual cues, or body language, creates coordination problems and makes interaction more difficult within the group. To address this, we must agree to protocols for the session. If the group agrees to abide by the protocols, and the facilitator enforces them, there is less room for misunderstanding or problems.

Some sample protocols may include:

- Quantity over quality
- Wild ideas are okay
- Suspend criticism
- Everyone participates
- Build on the ideas of others
- Voice opinions, allow others to do the same
- Say name before speaking
- Be as precise and succinct as possible
- No multi-tasking

Step 2. Generate Ideas

Your ability to facilitate is more important and challenging when brainstorming electronically. Some tips for improving your facilitation include:

- Explain process, ensure all understand
- Use attendee's names frequently
- Don't assume silence is agreement
- Frequently play back what you hear
- Intervene when someone is not following protocols

We brainstorm to inspire creativity and generate ideas we may not normally think of. While there are many approaches for inspiring creativity, three you may want to consider include: posing a question; using word association; or identifying a challenge.

Once the session is underway, make sure all ideas are captured. By capturing all ideas, you promote the view that no criticism and analysis are needed at this point and you ensure all participant ideas are treated with the same respect and attention.

Step 3. Organize

We have generated our ideas, now we need to organize them. Look for patterns or groups of ideas. If possible, the process of organizing should be done as a group as this often generates additional ideas. Our goal in organizing is to take the list of original ideas and make sure they are grouped or categorized in a way that is meaningful to the group.

Step 4. Select

With our organized ideas, we come to the point where we need to select the best ones. If your organization has a decision-making processes defined, applying it will give you consistency between sessions and an approach your team should already be familiar with. If you do not have processes defined for decision making, you may want to try one of the following to narrow your choices:

Process of elimination: Start with the least viable or desirable ideas. Remove ideas from consideration until you reduce the list to a manageable set of ideas.

Filtering: Define relevant criteria and compare each idea to those criteria. For instance, if keeping costs down is a high priority for you, one of the criteria for evaluating your ideas may be the potential return on investment.

Forced ranking: Force the group to rank ideas in order from least to most desirable. This approach forces the group to determine how all ideas relate to each other.

During idea selection, it is important to be sensitive to participants who have difficulty letting go of ideas they have generated. Be explicit about the process for selection and reiterate the purpose of the session. This can help re-focus attention on contributing to group success.

Step 5. Debrief

Brainstorming is a tool you will most likely find yourself using repeatedly over time. It is important once you have finished selecting the best ideas to ensure the next steps and ownership are defined for those ideas. It is also important to find out what worked and what could be improved for next time. To ensure constant improvement, ask “What did you like?” and “What do you wish we had done?” Be sure to capture feedback, acknowledge it, and be explicit about where it has been applied. Not doing so can affect your credibility with the group.

Approaches

There are a number of approaches we can take in how we run our electronic brainstorming sessions. You can choose synchronous (visual/aural) or asynchronous, or a combination.

Synchronous

- Instant feedback
- Everyone must be present

Examples: conference call, web conference

Visual = web conferencing, text/images

Aural = teleconference only

Asynchronous

- Better for time zone issues
- Can be easier to avoid
- Some people more comfortable with asynchronous over “live”

Examples: web site, email

Web Resources

Below is list of some available tools. HeiterConnect, Inc. does not endorse, promote, guarantee, or sell any of the products below, please use the links to learn more about any products of interest.

Mind Mapping Software

- [Free Mind](#) (Open Source)
- [Mind Manager](#) from MindJet
- [Visual Mind](#) from Mind Technologies
- [Mind Genius](#) from Gael Ltd.
- [Crystal Mapping](#)
- [ThinkGraph](#)
- [HeadCase](#)

Asynchronous Tools

- [Facilitate.com](#)
- [TWiki](#) (Open Source)

Next Steps

David: Research different ways of brainstorming. Determine topics.

Bob: Take a look at Free Mind

Chuck:

Keep in touch

For more information or to let us know about how this information has helped you with your virtual challenges, contact us at: info@heiterconnect.com, 978-597-9157, or www.heiterconnect.com.

