

ALLOWING YOUR STARS TO SHINE

by Ed Bernacki

NOT LONG AGO, I read that brainstorming is a good team building activity. In a business world that is shifting toward a greater focus on teamwork, this sounds great. But there is a problem: brainstorming is not a team building activity.

Alex Osborn, who first defined this approach for “harnessing people’s brains to storm through problems”, made his intent clear. He wrote, “Despite the advances in organised research, the creative power of the individual still counts most”. He viewed teamwork as a way to enhance the creativity of individuals. To prove his point, his insightful 1953 book, *Applied Imagination** spent 287 pages talking about processes to find powerful ideas as individuals and only 18 pages on doing this in groups.

Having worked with numerous organisations, I always find some people seem to find powerful ideas. These are people who like to think about the way things work and how they could work. Without considering themselves as innovative, they solve problems and find new ways to make things happen. They love the challenge to think, solve problems, create opportunities and take on challenges. These people are worth gold. They can be assistants to managers, PAs or senior managers. What many lack is the opportunity to have their ideas heard and understood. As a result, many great ideas are lost.

You need to recognise that the strength of these people is the power of their initiative. They should be nurtured and protected. Your job is to provide a forum for their ideas.

Alex Osborn defined brainstorming to improve the quality of decisions being made by groups working on a common challenge. We all recognise the scenario he saw – a group has a major challenge to tackle and calls together a meeting. Instead of “harnessing the brains to storm through the

problem” they end with discussions that go in circles. Solutions are not found. Decisions are postponed. To change this, focus on two perspectives:

1. PLANNING FOR RESULTS

Prior to the event, define the challenge at hand in writing. The discipline of writing it down clarifies your thinking. Give this challenge to each participant prior to the meeting. Tell each to prepare a two-minute response from his or her perspective (to ensure everyone prepares).

2. AVOID “DUMBING” DOWN A TEAM

Keep in mind that sport teams combine individual expertise to form a single powerful unit. Likewise, your brainstorming team should combine individual experts.

Some people are experts at finding ideas, while others are uncomfortable with untried ideas. Their skill will likely be on enhancing the original idea or helping to shape an action plan. All three skills of finding ideas, nurturing them and acting on them are necessary.

Your job is to find all three types and allow each a voice to use their expertise. Not everyone will have an equal voice – that’s OK.

Remember that brainstorming is designed to find better ideas to solve your problems and achieve results. Often when this happens, your team builds in strength. But that’s the by-product, not the goal!

* *Applied Imagination* is available from Amazon.com



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