K·STATE
Research and Extension

Working with Groups:

Gather Ideas or Data

Brainstorming

This technique is designed to encourage participation by all members. The goal is to generate a quantity of ideas in a short period of time. This method typically produces creative ideas that are useful in problem-solving situations. One of the benefits is that it is a nonjudgmental way to gather ideas. Brainstorming helps to break down barriers among people and avoids instant roadblocks such as "we've tried that before," "it didn't work," etc.

•   Basic rule: No idea can be judged, discussed, or rejected during brainstorming.

•   Set a time limit before you begin. Present the topic clearly and write it on paper for all to see. Give background information if necessary.

    — A recorder needs to be chosen to write down all of the ideas, word for word if possible.

    — If the group is fairly large you may want to use two flip charts and two recorders and alternate ideas written on charts.

•   Encourage people to throw out ideas as rapidly as they can.

    — Move rapidly from one idea to another. Build on the ideas from what already has been posted to magnify or to narrow the focus.

•   If one person seems to dominate, ask each person for suggestions. All members should participate.

•   Once ideas have been generated, ask for clarification, if needed.

After the brainstorming session is finished, evaluate and prioritize the list of ideas. Be careful to keep the discussion focused on the ideas and not on the person who suggested the idea.

Variation: Popcorn Brainstorming

This is a simple tool for groups to use when you feel that everyone is comfortable in contributing to the effort. Just open up the floor for ideas and take them as they come. No specific topic need be mentioned, or you can identify a general topic. Summarize ideas as necessary and record them on a flip chart.

Note of caution: When both employees and supervisors are in the same group, employees may feel obliged to agree with their supervisor, reducing the level of input or number of ideas. To overcome this situation, employees can sometimes be grouped separately from immediate supervisors.

Variation: Sticky Note Brainstorming

The process is fundamentally the same as a regular brainstorming session except you give individuals sticky notes to write down their ideas.

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