8 easy steps on how to solve any problem!

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Brainstorming is often the first step in creative problem-solving, but sometimes, it can feel like an overwhelming mess of ideas with no clear direction. The anatomy of a brainstorming session that has gone wrong can take so many different forms. Here are a few that I'm sure you've encountered at some point and time:

Too Many Ideas, Too Little Focus - Amid a brainstorming session, it's easy for ideas to start flooding in without any structure or purpose. While having a variety of ideas is good, without a clear goal or framework, participants may find themselves veering off-track and generating ideas that are irrelevant.

Groupthink and Lack of Diversity in Ideas - When brainstorming in groups, there's a risk of groupthink—where people start to conform to the dominant idea or opinion or even the most outspoken person in the room, stifling creativity and missing out on fresh perspectives.

Fear of Judgment or Criticism - If team members feel that their ideas will be immediately judged or shot down, they may hesitate to speak up or contribute.

No Follow-Up or Action Plan - Sometimes, a brainstorming session ends with a lot of great ideas, but without a clear action plan or next steps, all that creative energy can dissipate.

Overcomplicating the Process - Brainstorming sessions can also get bogged down in complicated tools or processes. Trying to use every creative technique available at once can create confusion and slow down the flow of ideas.

That's where **Affinity Mapping** comes in—a simple yet powerful technique that helps you organize and make sense of those ideas and eventually turn them into solutions to the problem you're trying to fix. Whether you're working on a team project, planning a new initiative, or tackling a personal challenge, Affinity Mapping allows you to sort through a sea of thoughts and identify patterns that lead to actionable insights and solutions.

Ready to turn chaotic creativity into clarity? Let's dive in!
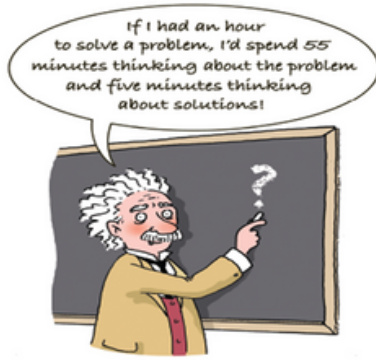
Step 1

Define the problem - Albert Einstein once said if presented with a problem and given an hour to find a solution he'd spend 55min pondering the problem and 5min coming up with a solution (or something of that sort). Clearly defining the problem you're attempting to solve goes a long way in setting up your brainstorming session for success. Here are 2 simple ways that have been effective for me in the past when getting clarity on a problem:

•   Being specific on the 'pain' experienced by myself and/or other affected individuals e.g., 'why does it take over an hour to print out this report?', 'why are there so many customer complaints about our service this summer?', 'why is my utilities bill twice as much as it was last year?' etc.
•   Asking what the consequences of a situation would be if we did nothing e.g., 'what happens if we don't do anything for a couple of months or until the end of the year?', 'will anyone notice if we simply postponed thinking about this until a more convenient time to deal with it?', 'can we just tackle this another time or when we're more prepared to deal with it?' etc.

Step 2

Bring a friend or two to the party - As the saying goes 'two heads are better the one' and the same applies to solving problems be they at work or personal. It's always more fun to get others who have experienced the problem or are indirectly affected by it to participate in a quick brainstorming exercise. And all you'll need are a work surface (floor or large table will do!), sticky notes or cards and marking pens.

Step 3

Write problem statement – Now that the problem has been clearly defined the group can agree on a written problem statement that will serve as the foundation for the brainstorming exercise. The problem statement should be written in the form of a question that the group can answer or find a solution(s) that address the issue e.g., 'why are customers frustrated with our service?', 'why are we exceeding our budget this year?', 'what's preventing us from meeting our project deadlines?' etc.

Step 4

Review problem statement – Have everyone review or think about the problem for 3-5min in complete silence. Provide tips on what should be taken into consideration as the group thinks about the problem to ensure alignment. A few simple questions to consider as the group ponders the problem are the typical what, how, when, where and why questions:

• The 'what is happening?' questions e.g., what are customers complaining about?' 'What is happening with our utility bills?' 'What is going on with our approval process?' etc.
• The questions e.g., how did we end up with so many customer complaints?' 'How did our utility bills end up being twice as much as last year?' 'How did we end up over budget on this project?' etc.
• The 'when did this happen?' questions e.g., when did customers begin to complain about our services?' 'When did we first notice an increase in our utility bills?' 'When did we start missing project deadlines?' etc.
• The 'where is this happening?' questions e.g., 'Where are we losing the most sales?' 'Where are we seeing the largest increase in our utility bills?' 'Where in our approval process are, we are experiencing delays?' etc.
• The 'why is this happening? questions e.g., 'Why are we receiving more complaints from customers?' 'Why are project deadlines being missed?' 'Why did we exceed our budget this month?' etc.

Step 5

Record ideas – After everyone has pondered the question in the time allotted provide each individual sticky notes or cards and have them write down their ideas on how to address the problem statement (don't forget about yourself!). This exercise should also be done in complete silence for 5-7min and below are a few tips on how to keep everyone on the same page:

•   Everyone should write down one idea per sticky note or card and the written ideas should be short, anywhere from 4 – 10 words long e.g., 'it takes too long to respond to customers' as a possible sticky note idea for the problem statement 'why are customers frustrated with our service?'
•   The participants should write down all the ideas that first come to mind and not screen or filter any items on their list.
•   No discussions should take place until everyone has exhausted their store or list of ideas and placed them on the floor or posted their sticky notes on the wall (whichever large surface is available to the team).
•   The participants should randomly place their sticky notes or cards on the designated large surface as what's most important at this time is having the team quickly see all the ideas.

Step 6

Analyze ideas – Gather everyone around all the posted sticky notes or cards and have them simultaneously look for relationships between the different individual ideas i.e., look for ideas that seem to be related in some way and place them side by side e.g., 'new customer representative onboarding is too short' and 'limited orientation classes for new customer representatives' are ideas that can be placed together as they are similar and make reference to training of new customer representatives. Below are a few tips on how to keep everyone aligned:

•   It is important that no one talks during this step as the focus should be on looking for and grouping related ideas.
•   Have the team sort the ideas into 5 to 10 related groupings until all the notes are grouped.
•   The notes should not be placed in any order and categories or headings should not be determined in advance.
•   It's okay to have "loners" that don't seem to fit a group and if a note seems to belong in two groups, make a second note e.g., 'onboarding platform is difficult to navigate' is an idea that could fall under both a 'training' or 'technology' grouping.

Step 7

Label ideas – Once the sticky notes with common themes or similar relationships are grouped together, label each group with a short title that represents the main idea of the group i.e., create summary or header cards for each grouping or category. Below are a few tips on how to keep everyone aligned:

•   Look for a note in each grouping that captures the meaning of the group. Place it at the top of the group. If there is no such note, write one (often it is useful to write or highlight this note in a distinct color)
•   Header cards should clearly identify the common thread for all groupings and should be descriptive of that thread e.g., a header titled 'Training' would have all ideas related to training fall under it or one titled 'Technology' would have all ideas that reference technology fall under it.

Step 8

Prioritize ideas – After labeling the groupings, the team should prioritize them based on importance or feasibility e.g., which issues are having the most negative impact on customer experience? Which can be solved quickly versus which will take longer? Below are a few tips on how to keep everyone on track:

•   Have team votes in the distinct categories i.e., everyone gets 10 votes and are allowed no more than 6 votes to be used in a single category (and all 10 votes must be used).
•   The thoughts captured in Step 4 should be leveraged to support the voting process of the team.
•   Solutions should be made around the 'winning' category and action items assigned to different members of the team with due dates e.g., as a solution for the prioritized idea 'it takes too long to respond to customers' in response to the problem statement 'why are customers frustrated with our service?'; the team could come up with solutions such as, all customer calls should be answered within 20sec and/or any follow-up with a customer should be completed within 48hrs.

Affinity Mapping is a powerful tool for turning chaotic ideas into clear, actionable insights. By organizing thoughts and feedback into thematic groups, teams can quickly identify patterns, prioritize issues, and brainstorm effective solutions. Whether you're tackling a customer experience challenge, improving a product, or fixing a broken process, affinity mapping helps you see the bigger picture and break down complex problems into manageable pieces.

The beauty of affinity mapping lies in its simplicity. It's a method that encourages collaboration and creativity, helping teams generate fresh ideas while also ensuring that the most important issues are addressed first.

So, the next time you're faced with a brainstorming session, consider using affinity mapping. By gathering your ideas, grouping them by theme, and analyzing the patterns, you can move from confusion to clarity—and set your team on the path to success.

Happy brainstorming!

Thank you for reading!

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