

Eric P. Bloom: **Brainstorming: A great root cause analysis tool for managers**



By Eric P. Bloom

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This week's column is my fourth of five columns on root cause analysis tools for managers. In the first column I explained Root Cause Analysis as the process of trying to discover the source (or sources) of a specific problem. I then went on to say that in the four weeks that followed I would describe a specific root cause analysis in depth. To date, we have discussed The Five Whys and Root Cause Mapping (RCM). This week we will be discussing Brainstorming.

I would like to begin by saying that Brainstorming is not only a great technique for root cause analysis, but it can also be used for problem solving, product development, strategic planning and a number of other uses. The text which follows primarily describes how Brainstorming is used as a root cause analysis tool, but when reading the description, try to think of other ways you can use it at home and within the workplace.

Giving credit where it's due, Brainstorming was brought to the forefront in Alex Osborn's book in 1953. Today, it is a technique known by most people. At a high level, this technique brings together a group of people to jointly discuss the issue in question in a facilitated manner. The basic premise is that a group of people collectively trying to find a solution can be much more productive, imaginative, and innovative than if each person tried to come up with solutions on their own. That is to say, that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

Here is a basic set of steps that describes the Brainstorming process.

1. Schedule a meeting, including the people that you would like to participate in the Brainstorm
2. Inform the participants of the topic that will be discussed. This is very important to a successful result, because it gives the participants time to individually think about the topic and collect their thoughts prior to the Brainstorming meeting.
3. In the meeting assign a specific person to write people's thoughts on a whiteboard or flip chart. Then, instruct the person to write down the ideas using the person's own words. This is important because it reduces the potential of thoughts being misinterpreted by person doing the writing.
4. All ideas are written down and are not evaluated during the Brainstorming session. This is important for two reasons. First, the time spent evaluating other people's thoughts reduces the time you spend coming up with your own ideas. Second, criticizing someone's idea can potentially stop them from participating if their idea was not liked by another participant.
5. All participants have an equal opportunity to participate. If this is not specifically stated at the beginning of the meeting, there is the potential that those in authority or people who are louder by nature may disproportionately sway the discussion in a specific direction.
6. Lastly, the person facilitating the meeting has two roles; first, to assure that the above steps are properly executed and second, help assure the discussion stays on topic in regard to finding the root cause of the problem you are trying to solve.

In addition to all the great ideas you can get from a Brainstorming session, it can also benefit you with regard to company politics. This is the case because the people involved in the Brainstorming session will be more likely to support the resulting action items because they were involved the process that created the solution. Remember this point when trying to decide who to invite to the meeting. After all, the people who are not part of the solution, may in turn become part of the problem.

The primary advice and takeaways from today's column is to know that:

- Brainstorming is a great tool that can be used in a number of ways well beyond just root cause analysis.
- In addition to all the great ideas you can get from a Brainstorming session, it can also benefit you with regard to company politics.

Until next time, manage well, manage smart, and continue to grow.

Author Bio:

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