
Innovators Must Master the Art of Brainstorming

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As if the mental athletics required by most high school classes aren't demanding enough, it's important to consider the different approaches to thinking. You've no doubt heard of critical thinking, which helps us become better problem solvers. But what about brainstorming, a type of thinking that can lead to inspiration and innovation?

Clément Mihailescu, 21 and a student at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, recalls the process of starting one of his first ventures when he was a junior in high school. "A few friends and I sat down in the cafeteria and brainstormed. We talked about problems in our school and how we could remedy them. By the end of the brainstorming session, we had come up with a neat idea for a computer-science club and website aimed at teaching students to become more tech-savvy. The club, which we called 'The Motherboard,' ended up being pretty successful within our school environment," he says.

Challenging Your Creative Mind

While he didn't know it at the time, Mihailescu was practicing a valuable skill that would help to make him a successful innovator – he was free-associating, or brainstorming. Brainstorming is great for generating lots of ideas and potential solutions, says Wharton management professor Tyler Wry. To do this, you've got to get away from a traditional way of thinking of the world, bend the rules, assess the ideas, bat them around and see what looks promising in the real world.

Ideas are quite literally at the heart of any new business venture, "and their degree of uniqueness and awesomeness will determine whether the venture succeeds or fails," says Mihailescu, who is now working on Qechy, a gift-giving service he started with a few Wharton classmates that helps you choose the best gift for your friend, family member or acquaintance. Mihailescu notes that he and his friends arrived at the idea this semester by setting aside time to talk about "pain points in our lives, other companies that sold cool products and random things that came to our minds."

He adds: "Brainstorming allows individuals and teams to challenge their creative minds and to actively come up with innovative and ground-breaking ideas, rather than to just hope that one day, the next big idea will magically pop into their heads."

Brandon Baker, an entrepreneur who has launched more than one business and lives and works in New York City, suggests it's also a good idea to start out by brainstorming on your own. Wry explains why: "Research says you get more ideas when you brainstorm individually and more impact when you brainstorm in groups." If you spend about one-third of the time brainstorming on your own and the rest of the time with other people, it can help you whittle down the ideas to high-quality ones.

An important outcome of brainstorming is innovation, which basically takes an idea and makes it better or applies an idea in a different context. Take the example of LinkedIn – it's like "Facebook for professionals," says Wry, because professionals can interact on a Facebook-style platform. It applies the concept of Facebook to the world of professionals. Coming up with these types of pairings helps loosen up thinking, notes Wry.

Baker launched his first venture when he bought and sold baseball tickets to the New York Yankees and Mets games on eBay at the age of 17. By the time he was a senior at the University of Pennsylvania, he self-published an e-book about how to profit from ticket-selling, making \$15,000, enough to pay off his student loans. After that, he expanded his self-publishing business, using brainstorming and market research to come up with his newest titles, hiring others to write books like *How to Be a Wedding Planner*. "Still to this day, there is plenty of potential that hasn't been met," says

Baker. But he views his publishing venture as “passive income” so he can focus on running his cake design business, Loveletter Cake Shop, with his wife, Carmela Tracy.

There Are No Bad Ideas!

Another example of innovation resulting from effective brainstorming is Neue Masche, a German company co-founded by Gabriel Karlberg. Neue Masche helps kids sell shirts and socks to fund school trips. Karlberg used to fundraise as a kid in Sweden, and when he was brainstorming with his friend in a Berlin cafe (over coffee, of course), they realized that Germany didn’t have this sort of business. In the last two years, they’ve generated 700,000 euros in revenue.

When learning to brainstorm effectively, Wry suggests that you follow some basic guidelines. Here are three tips:

1. **Set rules.** In a brainstorming session, it’s good to have some guiding principles, says Wry. You don’t want to shut anyone down and you also want to give everyone a chance to speak. There are no bad ideas! Choose a moderator, “not to guide the conversation, but to make sure everyone is following the rules. Conversations should be organic and guided by the group. Leaders have to make sure people are respectful and not closing down ideas prematurely,” Wry says.
2. **What would Croesus Do?** Wry often poses this question to his undergrad students. Croesus, an ancient Lydian king who ruled western Turkey, was famous for figuring out how to solve a problem if you were unconstrained by money, time, rules of nature, and so on. By thinking like a king, it helps you to think outside the box.
3. **Work backward to the real world.** Wry explains that this is about imagining what you want the final business model or product to look like, and then working backward to figure out how to make it happen. In other words, focus on the solution and then figure out a productive path to get there, Wry notes.

Feeling entrepreneurial? Brainstorming may be a great place to start.