

Are Two Heads Better than One?

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An article in the May, 2007 issue of “Fast Company” magazine suggests “Yes!” In “Be Creative—You Have 30 Seconds,” Linda Tischler describes an engineering design class at Northwestern University. The professor gives the following assignment: “You have thirty seconds to write down fifteen ways a cat is like a refrigerator.”

The students panic. Papers are blank. Creative paralysis sets in. (How many similarities have you identified?)

The professor laughs and says, “Okay. Let’s try this again. Sort yourselves into teams.”

Remarkably, ideas flow speedily. “They purr.” “They smell.” “They can be hard to get rid of.”

This introductory class activity quickly shows the value of a team approach to creativity.

Why don’t leaders use collaborative creativity more frequently to address issues and seek organizational improvement? One limitation is ego. Many leaders believe they are capable of generating all the answers.

Yet the people under your authority tend to resist that which is forced upon them, and they support that which they help create. One of your major roles as a leader is to gain alignment of those under your authority.

In collective reflection, people springboard off the ideas just generated. Each new thought is an intervention in the thinking pattern of the others, stimulating new proposals. Further, the more you generate ideas collectively, the more it becomes a part of the team’s culture, enhancing the desire to focus on continuous improvement.

“When Brainstorming Goes Bad” is an article by Michael Myser in the October, 2006 issue of “Business 2.0.” He offers three suggestions for improving organizational option generation.

Use a trained facilitator. Most brainstorming is led by an inexperienced manager who seeks a vested interest in the outcome. “People are uncomfortable sharing wild ideas in front of their boss.” According to a study cited in the article, groups using a skilled facilitator generate six times the ideas of groups without one.

Review the rules of brainstorming. Many groups treat the process far too casually. For example, criticism and judgment of ideas should be deferred until after the session. One role of the facilitator is to review the procedures before starting, then gently but firmly enforce them.

Prepare participants in advance. Results are not nearly as good if participants start from scratch. Letting people know the topic in advance stimulates subconscious creativity. If there is no time to prepare, loosen up the group using a practice problem to stretch imaginations and familiarize individuals with the rules of brainstorming.

Sometimes the situations leaders face aren’t appropriate for brainstorming by individuals in the organization. That’s when a relationship with a mentor, personal friend, or coach can help. We all need someone we can talk with openly, someone who will provide a safe environment for exploring.

Ecclesiastes 4:9-10 reads: “Two people can accomplish more than twice as much as one. They get a better return for their labor. If one person falls, the other can reach out and help. But people who are alone when they fall are in real trouble!”

Are you laboring under the false expectation that, as a leader, you must make every decision on your own? Seek a relationship with someone to whom you can turn and safely ask, “Will you help me think about possible responses I might make to this situation I face?” When generating and considering options, two heads are definitely better than one!

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