

Brainstorming is big at most organizations today, but in becoming ubiquitous it has lost something. The invitation “Let’s brainstorm about that” typically leads to a gathering in a conference room where the convener asks for ideas then shoots them down as fast as they come up. Brainstorming has been compressed and made more efficient—killing its real purpose in the process.

The whole point of brainstorming is to let creativity shine. You need to be very careful not to let criticism stifle that creativity. The creative process must be supported, nurtured and embraced wholeheartedly to generate good results. To that end, I’ve developed 10 commandments of brainstorming, universal rules to help establish a framework for imagination and creativity.

Print out a copy of these rules and tape them to the wall before any brainstorming session. I’d also suggest you bring a bell, kazoo, drum or other noisemaker to the session. Every time someone breaks one of the commandments, ring the bell or beat the drum. Make your whole team responsible for enforcing the rules and holding everyone else accountable. Think of the rules as non-negotiable and make sure everyone on your team agrees to them before any idea generation begins.

1. THOU SHALT NOT JUDGE.

As ideas begin to flow, you must do everything in your power to let them flow. No one should be allowed to offer any judgment of any idea. The idea-generation phase is about generating ideas, not ranking them. Just let them run like the mighty Amazon. There will be plenty of time to evaluate them later.

2. THOU SHALT NOT COMMENT.

Even if the person next to you throws out the stupidest idea you’ve ever heard, let the process continue. The slightest comment or criticism will change the mood in the room, and the group will start to clam up. The objective is to bring ideas to the surface, not to discuss them. The only acceptable comment is a very short “wow,” “cool,” or “sweeeeeet.”

3. THOU SHALT NOT EDIT.

Don’t let your inner editor join the session. When you’re brainstorming it doesn’t matter where the comma goes in the sentence, or how best to word something. The font choice, color palette and idea name are irrelevant. Editing is a left-brain activity that is completely separate from idea generation. Keep it that way. First, let the ideas come out; sloppy and uninhibited. You’ll have plenty of opportunity to edit later.

4. THOU SHALT NOT EXECUTE.

The second an idea hits the whiteboard; you can easily become distracted by thinking about execution. You'll wonder how the idea would come to life. What would it cost? Who would run it? What would the project plan look like? What would the financial implications be? Where would the work take place? When would we begin? Those are great questions for later but avoid them at this stage. They are your left-brain in all its glory sneaking in and vying for a seat at the table. As important as that kind of thinking may be, it will quickly crush your creativity. Keep it out of the room.

5. THOU SHALT NOT WORRY.

Fear is the single biggest blocker of creativity. It is pounded into us from childhood on. We learn in school that there is always one right answer and mistakes should be avoided at all cost. You need to release that fear to unshackle your true creative potential. If you're leading the group, emphasize this before you begin. Tell your colleagues that every idea matters and that the whole point of the exercise is to get a lot of ideas on the board. To best create an environment where everyone feels comfortable taking risks and has no fear of embarrassment or negative consequences, set an example. If you as leader aren't afraid to toss out silly, outrageous ideas, you will enable others to release their fears as well, so that their most creative thinking can emerge.

6. THOU SHALT NOT LOOK BACKWARD.

We can always learn a lot from the past, but it can also limit our ability to invent the future. Holding back an idea because we tried it once before and it didn't work out so well is highly limiting. Think how much the world changes every day. An idea today comes into a world with an entirely new set of circumstances, market conditions, technologies and customer tastes. If it didn't work in the past, it may just have been ahead of its time. Or perhaps that idea, when revisited, will lead to a revised version that can carry the day. Every idea is new at this moment, so share everyone that you believe has merit.

7. THOU SHALT NOT LOSE FOCUS.

Idea sessions can easily dissolve into wandering and woolgathering. Don't let it happen. An idea might remind someone of a story she just has to tell. Or it might lead to taking on a different creative challenge or discussing a completely different topic. A right-brain creative state is so rare and so refreshing that its energy and excitement can cause a team to stray. To solve this, keep what I call a parking lot list. When unrelated topics come up, put them on the parking lot list to be discussed another time. This will keep the group focused on the task at hand while still making sure that important concepts are remembered and can get attention later.

8. THOU SHALT NOT SAP ENERGY.

There are two kinds of people, zappers and sappers. When you're with a zapper, you feel energized. You become engaged, you lean forward, you feel stimulated, which is ideal for creative expression. Sappers are the folks who drain your energy. Even if you've just had six shots of espresso and four Red Bulls, you want to fall asleep after speaking with them for five minutes. Just as you manage the clock or manage a budget, manage energy. The collective energy of the room can build into a frenzy, unleashing brilliant ideas while everyone has a great time, or it can devolve into yet another boring, BlackBerry-checking, clock-watching drone session. Do everything you can to keep the energy up. High-fives, cheers and positive vibes for all. Don't allow negativity and energy-draining commentary to suck the life from the room.

9. THOU SHALT NOT COMPARE.

Comparing ideas is an insidious form of criticism that needs to be checked at the door with all other left-brain habits. Comparing usually contains an implicit criticism. "That's like the idea Jim had back in '05" sounds harmless enough on the face of it but think again. Remember Jim? Everyone hated him.

10. THOU SHALT NOT MAKE FUNNY AT OTHERS' EXPENSE.

Brainstorming can become quite jolly, and the temptation to start joking about what comes up can be hard to resist. But resist it you must. Laughter at the expense of an idea is a fast way to kill it.

Follow these commandments assiduously to prevent your brainstorming sessions from wasting everyone's time and producing only the same safe—and probably useless—ideas the group had last time. Brainstorming is a profoundly useful creative technique, but only if you use it properly.