

Creative and Effective Brainstorming

The Value of Brainstorming

Brainstorming is a creative group activity that brings together people with different points of view to generate ideas in an environment free from judgment. Brainstorming can be used to solve a problem, produce new ideas, or expand on existing ones. Bringing everyone to the table can help your team or organization think outside of the box and is also a great way to strengthen the collaboration among individuals through mutual goals.

Welcoming Environment

It can be intimidating to share your ideas with a whole group of people. To have a successful brainstorm session, you have to create an environment where everyone feels comfortable speaking up. Here are some tips for creating a welcoming environment:

- Warm up. Warm-up exercises can help people loosen up. Ask everyone in the group to share their favorite “something.” Or, have everyone sketch another person in the group and have the rest of the group guess who it is. Find more ideas on [Brightspot](#) and icebreaker question ideas from [Miro](#).
- Use props. Providing stress balls, fidget toys, and other items for people to play with during brainstorming can help people relax and think creatively.
- Keep it small. [Aim for 10 people or fewer](#) so that everyone has an opportunity to participate. Too many or too few, and some participants may find it intimidating to speak. If you have a lot of participants, consider breaking up into smaller groups. Be sure to invite people who can offer diverse perspectives.
- Model openness. As the leader, be vulnerable with your group. Let them know that it’s okay to be open—and okay to say you don’t know or can’t come up with something.

Brainstorming Questions

Any brainstorming session needs at least one question, which should be based on a goal you would like to achieve or a challenge you would like to overcome. As you create your questions, consider the following:

- Questions are most productive when they are short, simple, and open-ended.
- Start broad and drill down.
- Think about if you want to provide questions ahead of time. Depending on the topic and the group you are working with, it may be beneficial to share questions so that people have time to prepare their thoughts. Or you may prefer not to share to encourage more spontaneous answers.

Try this!

Find unique ways to ask questions to inspire creative thinking and reveal answers you may not receive with a traditional prompt. Get people thinking differently by posing your question in a way that is personally relatable. Try asking a question two ways, and then exploring the differences while also making a large list.

For example, first ask, what do older adults need? Complete that brainstorm and then ask, what will you want as you age? You may be surprised at how much your group adds when the question is personalized.

[See sample responses](#) to these questions later in this document.

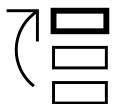
Before the Session

- **Decide on a format to take notes and designate a note-taker.** It's important to record the ideas that people in the group share. You can write everything on a whiteboard or large piece of paper. You can also use digital tools — like a [word cloud by Mentimeter](#), [IdeaBoardz](#), [Google Jamboard](#), or a digital whiteboard — to record people's ideas.¹
- **Set a time limit.** Limit the brainstorming session to between 30 and 60 minutes. Remember that the more participants you have, the more time you will need. Even with a small group, allow at least 15 minutes per brainstorming question.
- **Develop criteria for ranking ideas.** This should be done before brainstorming begins. The criteria will vary depending on the question being asked. Ranking generally takes into account things like finances, feasibility, interest level, etc.
- **Set the tone.** Ensure everyone understands that all ideas are welcome, even those that may seem “silly.” Emphasize that you're focused on quantity, not quality, at this point.

After the Session

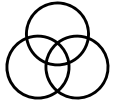


Share. If you used a physical whiteboard or posterboard, take a photo of it and send it to participants. If you used a digital format, email it to the group. Additionally, thank participants for sharing ideas, and make note of the value they provided.



Prioritize. Ask your brainstorm participants to rank ideas using the identified criteria. Then, consider polling seniors to ask what is most important. Be specific – include a clear goal and details around each idea, not just keywords. Ask for comments by phone, paper ballot, online survey, or during regular programming.

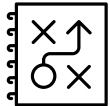
¹ Tools are not endorsed by the Senior Nutrition Program nor the Administration for Community Living.



Analyze. During and after the prioritization phase, take a critical look at the shortlist of key ideas generated by the brainstorming. This will help you come to a decision on the next steps, including what programming/activities, if any, you will add or adjust.

This step should be completed at the program management level. Try using some of the following questions to guide your thinking and conversations.

- Does this idea align with our organizational/program mission and values?
- Did we clearly hear that staff, volunteers, and/or seniors would appreciate a service or activity based on the idea?
- Do we have other evidence to support this idea as a worthwhile effort?
- How does this idea compare to our existing services/activities – does it validate something we’re already doing or identify a gap?
- Would we need to stop doing another activity to try this new idea?
- What are the resources (people, knowledge/skills, technology, space, money, and time) needed to pursue this idea?
- Are there other organizations doing something like this that we could use as a model – or partner with?
- What do we expect to be the positive outcomes of trying this idea?
- What would be the return on our investment?
- Are there any downsides to pursuing this idea?
- Who else needs to approve this idea, and are they likely to do so?



Execute. Following analysis and discussion, if an idea (activity/programming change) will take place, it is time to plan and implement the associated tasks. As with any other initiative, gather the people who will be involved and discuss the path ahead. Start by creating a work plan with tasks, roles, responsibilities, and deadlines.

Reminder: Evaluate

Remember that evaluation is an important part of implementing any new idea. As part of your planning process, decide how you will define success – and how you will measure that. Build in regular reviews of the activity and outcomes, which will also serve as a time to think about adjustments that can make it more effective.

Example Question & Responses

What do older adults need?

(Typical prompt)

- Family
- Emotional support
- Opportunities to contribute
- To be heard
- Social interaction
- Positive place for support
- Palliative care
- Food
- Health care
- Affordable medication
- Love
- Stimulation
- Mental health services
- Support services
- Understanding
- Help with medical appointments
- Connection and support
- Access to care
- Programs in their native language
- Security
- Respect
- Physical activity
- Medical care
- Housing options
- Muscles
- Transportation
- Information
- Affordable care, long- and short-term
- Affordable housing
- Companionship

What will you want as you age?

(Personal prompt)

- Partner
- Affordable housing
- Financial stability
- Socialization
- My mental and physical health
- Transportation
- Concerts
- Understanding health care options
- Strength
- Insurance
- Community
- Fun family vacations
- Support
- Family
- Safety
- Mental health services
- Friends
- Exercise
- A senior center that is hip
- Social activities
- Organized closets and basement
- Bingo
- Scooter
- A ramp
- Pool
- Things to do
- Connection and purpose
- Affordable healthcare
- Someone to help with cable and Wi-Fi
- Good neighbors
- A safe world to live in
- Help in the house and yard
- Yoga
- Gardens
- Smoothies

Observation

Reactions to the typical prompt are valid but the personal prompt revealed unique points. For example, “physical activity” (typical prompt) indicates exercise is important, but “pool” and “yoga” (personal prompt) may spark ideas for specific activities like water aerobics or meditation. Considering your own wants and needs can help you make programming more meaningful for those in your community.

Example Board Displays

Typical Prompt



Personal Prompt

