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Validation: Brainstorming doesn't actually work

Joe Ferullo | Feb. 3, 2012 NCR Today

It feels wonderful sometimes to have a certain aggravation of yours validated by major national publications. This isn't a proper feeling -- not Christian, really -- because it borders on vengeance. Still, it sends the heart pumping and the blood racing, as a certain ungenerous smugness blankets your psyche.

And so it is for me, I reluctantly admit.

Here's the aggravation: I am strongly allergic to something often referred to as "brainstorming." You know the concept: Get a bunch of people in a room with a blank sheet of paper and command instant brilliance. "We need a new campaign for Irish Spring soap by four o'clock. Let's go, people!"

Short of soap commercials (maybe), I've felt this kind of thing to be a colossal waste of time. A waste of time now stamped as such by reports in *The New York Times* [1] and the *New Yorker* [2].

In fact, the usually gentle and obtuse *New Yorker* drops the old world politesse, just comes out and says it in their report: "Brainstorming doesn't work."

A rash of prominent studies have proven what anyone stuck in one of these things knows deep in her/his DNA. Brainstorming sessions evolve in a predictable pattern: At the start, people tend to dive in with fresh ideas. Soon, though, fresh ideas are kicked to the curb, the most willful personalities in the room dominate and -- inevitably -- group-think sets in. Everyone gravitates to the safest idea, the one that will make no one seem like a fool in the eyes of their peers and superiors.

Which is the exact opposite of creativity.

But, as the *Times* reports, the thing creativity requires is in ever-diminishing supply: solitude. Study after study shows creative minds work best when left alone -- they need a break from frantic activity to reset and recharge, to look at a situation with a fresh, unexpected perspective. For the brainstorm brigade, however, this is heresy. In too many corporate offices and gatherings of all sorts, the driving force is the group. Two heads are better than one, and 24 heads sitting around a huge conference room table munching on almonds and drinking bottled water are that much better.

I have hope. Many brainstormers I know actually do read the *Times* and the New Yorker -- no doubt in groups of seven or more so they can discuss every paragraph. These reports might sink in, and it may become trendy to disparage brainstorming sessions -- a new sign of coolness and confidence to tell everyone, Think about this alone, and come on back in a couple of days, let's see what we get.

That would be heaven.

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[1] http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/15/opinion/sunday/the-rise-of-the-new-groupthink.html?pagewanted=all
[2] http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2012/01/30/120130fa_fact_lehrer