

Reverse Brainstorming

A Different Approach to Brainstorming

Reverse brainstorming helps you solve problems by combining brainstorming and reversal techniques. By combining these, you can extend your use of brainstorming to draw out even more creative ideas.

To use this technique, you start with one of two "reverse" questions:

Instead of asking, "How do I solve or prevent this problem?" ask, "How could I possibly cause the problem?"

Instead of asking "How do I achieve these results?" ask, "How could I possibly achieve the opposite effect?"

How to Use the Tool

1. Clearly identify the problem or challenge, and write it down.
2. Reverse the problem or challenge by asking, "How could I possibly cause the problem?" or "How could I possibly achieve the opposite effect?"
3. Brainstorm the reverse problem to generate reverse solution ideas. Allow the brainstorm ideas to flow freely. Do not reject anything at this stage.
4. Once you have brainstormed all the ideas to solve the reverse problem, now reverse these into solution ideas for the original problem or challenge.
5. Evaluate these solution ideas. Can you see a potential solution? Can you see attributes of a potential solution?

Tip:

Reverse brainstorming is a good technique to try when it is difficult to identify solutions to the problem directly.

Example

Luciana is the manager of a health clinic and she has the task of improving patient satisfaction.

There have been various improvement initiatives in the past and the team members have become rather skeptical about another meeting on the subject. The team is overworked, team members are "trying their best" and there is no appetite to "waste time" talking about this.

So she decides to use some creative problem solving techniques she has learned. This, she hopes, will make the team meeting more interesting and engage people in a new way.

Perhaps it will reveal something more than the usual "good ideas" that no one has time to act on.

To prepare for the team meeting, Luciana thinks carefully about the problem and writes down the problem statement:

"How do we improve patient satisfaction?"

Then she reverses problem statement:

"How do we make patients more dissatisfied?"

Already she starts to see how the new angle could reveal some surprising results.

At the team meeting, everyone gets involved in an enjoyable and productive reverse brainstorming session. They draw on both their work experience with patients and also their personal experience of being patients and customers of other organizations. Luciana helps ideas flow freely, ensuring people to not pass judgment on even the most unlikely suggestions.

Here are just a few of the "reverse" ideas:

- Double book appointments.
- Remove the chairs from the waiting room.
- Put patients who phone on hold (and forget about them).
- Have patients wait outside in the car park.
- Discuss patient's problems in public.

When the brainstorming session runs dry, the team has a long list of the "reverse" solutions. Now it's time to look at each one in reverse to think about a potential solution. Well-resulting discussions are quite revealing. For example:

- "Well of course we don't leave patients outside in the car park – we already don't do that."
- "But what about in the morning, there are often patients waiting outside until opening time?"
- "Mmm, true. Pretty annoying for people on first appointments."
- "So why don't we open the waiting room 10 minutes earlier so it doesn't happen"
- "Right, we'll do that from tomorrow. There are several members of staff working already, so it's no problem."

And so it went on. The reverse brainstorming session revealed many improvement ideas that the team could implement swiftly and Luciana concluded: "It was enlightening and fun looking at the problem in reverse. The amazing thing is, it's helped us become more patient-friendly by stopping doing things rather than creating more work".

Key Points

Reverse brainstorming is a good technique for creative problem solving, and can lead to robust solutions. Be sure to follow the basic rules of brainstorming to explore possible solutions to the full.