

Brainstorming: help employees with solutions to health and safety hazards

This resource is part of SAIF's leadership project, which is meant to help employers and leaders of organizations establish strong and sustainable safety cultures using research-based concepts and strategies.

Sometimes it's hard for creative ideas to flow. Here are some ideas to help you get started:

- Draw a picture
- Go for a walk outside
- Take a break
- Listen to music
- Bounce ideas off someone else
- Do more research



How does brainstorming relate to workplace safety? Brainstorming is the process of problem-solving in a judgement free zone, so you come up with the best possible solution that includes bits and pieces of everyone's ideas. This can help you resolve any workplace concerns that may arise, such as past injuries and hazards.

Purpose

To collectively come up with a solution to a work problem and ensure that everyone has a say in how it is being solved. Brainstorming can also be effective if you are out of ideas and need to come up with new ones moving forward.

Benefits of Brainstorming

Brainstorming has many benefits; it can help you establish team-building practices. If your employees feel comfortable enough to bounce ideas off each other in a structured setting, this sets the stage for them to do it more informally when the stakes aren't as high. Brainstorming can also help give perspective, as you are approaching a problem to solve using multiple opinions and ideas. It can also encourage self-learning, provide a better understanding of the issue, and break mental blocks.

Ground rules

- Keep it a judgement free zone. Idea generation is easiest when no idea is a bad idea.

- Capture anything. Emphasize freedom in brainstorming, allow the group to let ideas flow freely.
- Absorb the ideas of others. An important part of brainstorming is building from each other's ideas and using them as inspiration.

Tools for brainstorming

Brainstorming can be made easier with the use of a few tools, including a whiteboard and markers or pen and paper. There are a variety of online tools that could also be used to share your ideas electronically. These will help you record your plans of action so you can come back to them later.

Who you should include

Discuss the aim of your brainstorming session with your group. Because you want to get as many relevant ideas as possible, including anyone who is interested, or who your end goal will affect will be your best bet. This could be your employees or upper management, just to name a few.

Follow through is important in this process. If these ideas are something upper management is implementing, keeping the employees well informed about it can help support morale. Just knowing that management is taking their ideas into account and considering them in the process can help them feel heard and validated.

How to be creative when brainstorming

This process works most effectively when you have a specific goal in mind. In this case you may come up with things related to your safety goals or identify specific areas of work that require innovation.

There are many different methods of brainstorming, but here are just a few ideas:

- Ask open ended questions to stimulate thinking. The team leader can provide a statement like "Problems happen when...?" to get the group thinking about viable solutions. Individuals can go around and share their thoughts on the matter.
- Take turns sharing ideas. Your team can sit in a circle and designate one person to start with a topic. Then you go around in a circle, with each person building on that topic until it is fully flushed out.
- Start with short words and concepts to inspire new ideas. By building off of each other's ideas you can make new conclusions.

Success story

Robert is the manager in a sushi restaurant that has been struggling with a drop in sales. Wanting to find the root of the issue and solve the problem, he decides to have a staff meeting to brainstorm solutions.

After an hour or so of brainstorming the why, they realize that the protective gloves they've been using for slicing the fish are old and worn down. Because of this, they get in the way of slicing the fish and adversely affect efficiency and productivity, among other aspects of their operation. They also notice that they aren't sharpening their knives as much and having sharp knives may make the process go faster. Brainstorming simple solutions, they conclude that they need to purchase new protective equipment and implement procedures that support sharpening knives regularly. Through group collaboration and careful thinking, they solved a problem together.

The person who is capable of producing a large number of ideas per unit of time, other things being equal, has a greater chance of having significant ideas.

- JP Guilford, American psychologist who studied human intelligence

Activity ideas

- Do you want practice brainstorming with a group? Try our Thankfulness activity to get your group warmed up to the idea of brainstorming. (www.saif.com/S1194)
- Create a mind map! If you have paper and a pen handy, it may help facilitate your brainstorming session to have a starting point that branches out into many different ideas. The point of this mind map is to build off of previous ideas, and elaborate on them so you have something entirely new.
- Try brainwriting! First, everyone writes down three ideas that relate to the topic of the brainstorming session. Set a timer for 3-6 minutes to allow for enough time for ideas to flow. Then everyone passes their ideas to the person on their right or left, who will then build off the ideas, writing new bullet points or suggestions. After another few minutes, everyone passes the piece of paper again until it makes it all the way around the table. Once the ideas have made it around the circle, the group discusses them and decides which ideas are best to pursue.