Charette

Brainstorming Multiple Ideas with Multiple Stakeholders

Have you ever tried to hold a brainstorming session with more than 10 or 15 people? Or tried to brainstorm ideas for two or more related issues? It's rarely pretty! These sessions quickly spin out of control, becoming chaotic and unproductive. What's more, they tend to be dominated by only a few people, with the majority remaining silent.

When an idea-generating session has numerous related issues or numerous stakeholders, simple brainstorming is often inadequate. This means that sessions are less creative than they might be, buy-in is undermined, and people disengage from the process. This is a serious problem if you need to achieve consensus.

However, brainstorming can still be effective if you take a slightly different, organized approach.

One such approach has a name: The Charette Procedure (sometimes spelled ‘Charrette’). It involves organizing people into several small groups, each of which brainstorms ideas one-after-the-other until everyone involved has had a chance to contribute fully. Derived from the French word for wagon, it come from the practice of architecture students in the early 1800s, who used carts to rush their drawings from one place to another to get final approvals. In much the same way, when you use a Charette, you take the ideas generated by a group, and cart them over to the next group, for them to be built upon, refined, and finally prioritized.

The Charette Procedure allows for maximum participation in idea generation, without compromising the quality or effectiveness of the brainstorming. The benefits of the process include:

- Effective use of time because many issues can be discussed at the same time;
- Improved buy-in from stakeholders, who have the opportunity to contribute their ideas on each issue;
- Encouragement of high quality options because the most popular ideas are polished with each round of discussion;
- Elimination of stalled discussion, because new people can progress an issue on each round.

How to Use the Tool

The Charette Procedure is quite simple to apply. Depending on your situation you may complete the various group discussions in one day, or they can be held over a series of days or weeks. The system you choose will be based on the logistics involved and the magnitude of your project.

1. Agree on a set of issues that need to be discussed.

2. Divide your larger group into small groups that are conducive to brainstorming. As with many types of group interaction, a group size of seven participants plus the recorder is ideal. When planning the groups, consider the following:
   - If you have a set deadline, make sure the number of groups and iterations can be accommodated.
   - Think about the mix of people within the groups. Groups with a diverse mix of skills, background and experience are generally more creative than those of similarly skilled people.
   - Make sure the number of groups is equal to or greater than the number of issues to discuss.
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3. Assign an issue to each group. If there are more groups than issues, then assign some issues to more than one group.

4. Have each group elect a recorder. You may also suggest this person facilitates the group discussion as well.

5. Each group brainstorms an issue.
   - Record all ideas, as for regular brainstorming
   - Set a time limit for discussion. This will depend heavily on your overall schedule as well as the complexity of the issues being discussed. Strike a balance between too short a session that might not uncover enough detail, and longer discussions that might lose focus

6. When the group’s time is up, the recorder moves to the next group.
   - The recorder reviews the issues and current state of the brainstorming list with the new group.
   - Brainstorming begins again, with each group now discussing a new idea or issue. The new group builds on the existing ideas and generates new one.
   - Repeat this step until each group has discussed each issue once.

7. In the final group session, allow time to organize and draw together the ideas into key ideas, themes or strands. If several groups have been working at the same time on the same issue, this is a good time to bring together the different streams of ideas.

8. Once the final session has finished, reconvene the whole group and have the recorders present their lists. This is a good time to work with the group to prioritize issues or approaches, if this is appropriate. Techniques that can help you with this are:
   - Nominal Group Technique
   - Multi-voting

Takeaway
The Charette Procedure is an efficient and effective process for brainstorming and capturing ideas, when there are multiple issues and many people involved. It is a systemic and organized approach that allows everyone to contribute in a meaningful way. When you are faced with a complex, multiplayer decision, the Charette Procedure is a great way to harness ideas and priorities as the foundation of well-considered and widely accepted plans.