

Performance Vistas, Inc.

2145 Azalea Drive
Roswell, Georgia 30075
O: (770) 992-0679
www.PerformanceVistas.org

Stimulating Creativity



The four great obstacles to increased innovation among the work force are (1) people don't realize how creative they can be; (2) creativity is not demanded of them; (3) they have not been encouraged to experiment with new combinations that break old habits; and (4) few organizations systematically invite innovative thinking by the work force. Here are several simple techniques you can use to bring about on-the-job improvements. Demand that your people overcome their *functional fixity* – their tendency to view a situation from only one point of view

Brainstorming: Brainstorming became a fad in the '50s for a range of superficial uses. Today, it can be a valuable and enjoyable exercise to gain more depth. Steps:

1. Select a work issue that holds promise for improvement. Analyze your work methods, prepare for an emergency, motivate your employees, or solve any problem.
2. Tell the participants in advance the nature and purpose of the exercise. You can bet that those close to the work situation will have realistic suggestions for coping with or improving it.
3. Participants should let their imaginations run free. The key terms are *combine, eliminate, modify, adapt, rearrange, substitute, put to other uses, change the sequence, and redesign.*
4. The purpose is to build a pool of useful ideas. Hence, no criticism is permitted at this stage.
5. When a suitable number of suggestions are in hand, classify them under three headings: most practical, probably useful, and good but unrealistic.
6. Help the group discuss ways of implementing the most valid suggestions. Identify those worthy of further exploration. One of the difficulties with brainstorming is the lack of follow-through after the pleasant experience of "Imagineering." So, plan for follow-up action!



Improvement Sessions: The improvement session can be held quarterly or as part of a regular meeting. Steps:



1. Target a part of the operation that can and should be improved: your work methods, needless use of overtime, wasted resources, cost over-runs, poor quality or quantity of production.
2. Leader chairs the first go-round. Your people must experience your concern for improvement, the limits within which they are to work, and how free they are to challenge the accepted ways of doing things.

¹ Taken from *Leadership: Strategies for Organizational Effectiveness*, James J. Cribbin, AMACOM, 1981.

In later sessions, you can rotate the lead among members.

3. Before the session, let your people know the objectives of the session. Ask them to come prepared to contribute constructive ideas. That's how this method differs from brainstorming.
4. Encourage the participants to voice their suggestions, no matter how radical, as long as all ideas are based on evidence and practicality.
5. When the group is spent, evaluate each idea in terms of the realities of the work situation.

Barnacle Sessions: Organizations are like saltwater ships. Willy-nilly, they pick up barnacles that reduce their speed. An occasional barnacle session sensitizes people to those small inefficiencies that inevitably take hold in an organization if they are not detected and eliminated promptly. It is obviously the reverse of an improvement session, but the procedural steps are the same. In both cases it is important that the lead be rotated among your key subordinates. Each leader should be responsible for thinking of a part of the operation that can be improved or in which inefficiencies can be eliminated or minimized. These two simple types of sessions can produce valuable results. Suppose, for instance, that four departments held as few as four meetings of each type per year. At least 32 opportunities or problem areas would receive concentrated study!



Pride Sessions: Eagerness to improve can sometimes have the unanticipated consequence of causing people to focus on what is *wrong* rather than take pride in what is well done. Now and then, part of a meeting should be devoted to reinforcing the successes of the work force. Pride sessions emphasize the positive; they strengthen the participants' sense of competence, adequacy, and worth. They enable leaders to tune in on what people regard as their assets. The mechanics are uncomplicated. The leader asks a simple question, "What are the three things we do that make us proud to work in this department?" Each person writes down three ideas.



This is followed by feedback and a general discussion of how even the well done things can be done better. (Consider examining the criteria people use to judge performance: productivity, customer satisfaction and outcomes, cost-savings.) A variation: administer a one-page questionnaire to the entire work force. Each employee fills in three open-ended questions anonymously: (1) I like working in this unit because...; (2) I do not care particularly for...; (3) For the future, I suggest that... This is also an excellent way of asking for customer viewpoints about the services of the organization. The process takes very little time and the feedback can be used to help establish action plans for improvement, not to mention agenda items for future discussion.

Hot-Seat Sessions: The presentation and defense of a viewpoint is a centuries-old educational device. It is commonplace in MBA programs, where a student or team is responsible for the analysis, presentation, and defense of a case study. The technique can be applied to a work session. A subordinate manager is asked in advance to present to the work group at least: (1) the objectives of his group; (2) what the team does to attain objectives; (3) what methods they use; (4) why they use these methods; (5) what they do well; (6) what they do acceptably; and (7) what they do with less-than-desirable performance. The group then critiques the presentation *content*, pointing out what may have omitted or minimized, and



offering suggestions to help. Be sure to remind the participants that while it is expected that they be intellectually demanding, they are also to be emotionally supportive. It's their turn next!

The Delphi Approach: Several things make complete honesty hard in a group situation. Differences in status, authority, and power may suppress openness. "Talkers" often overwhelm "thinkers." Some always go along with the majority; some resist. Personalities, rather than ideas, may clash and adversary subgroups may be formed, each defending a provincial viewpoint. Premature criticism of suggestions dries up excellent sources of ideas. When this happens, unique suggestions are lost because they're perceived as "deviant." The Delphi approach, named for the ancient Greek oracle, asks participants not to meet, but to communicate in writing. Often employed to write prognostications about the future, Delphi can readily be adapted to any work situation.



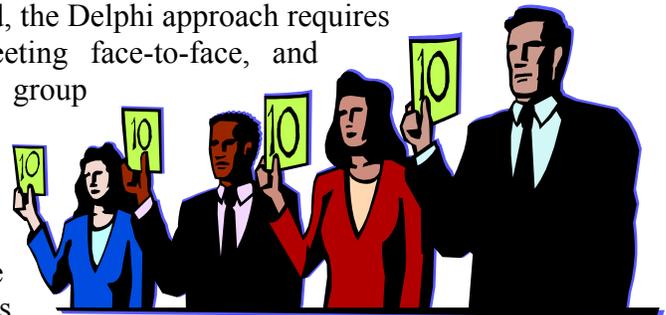
It requires little time and need not interrupt the work flow. Steps:

1. Choose people who are competent in the subject under consideration. Key subordinates qualify on such matters as friction between departments, communication problems, and methods of improving productivity.
2. Each person writes down his own perceptions of the opportunity or problem, together with proposed strategies for coping with or capitalizing on it. This is best done anonymously.
3. Send a summary of the central thrust of all the responses to each participant.
4. Each person responds with a second "take," altering first-round ideas as stimulated by the feedback, justifying any departure from initial positions. Repeat as needed.

Usually only two rounds are needed to ferret out the best ideas. More important, the research indicates that better decisions and strategies are reached this way than in face-to-face discussions.

The Nominal Group Approach: Strictly defined, the Delphi approach requires participants to remain anonymous, never meeting face-to-face, and communicating only in writing – to take group dynamics out of the deliberations. The nominal group approach modifies the Delphi: people know each other and meet together to reach new ideas. Steps:

1. Seven to ten group members meet and are informed of the opportunity or problem, as well as the rules of the game.
2. Each person lists his or her ideas on a piece of paper privately.
3. Each participant voices one suggestion, which is posted on a flip chart.
4. Step 3 is repeated until all the ideas have been listed.
5. Each idea or proposed solution is discussed and analyzed. The team may cluster similar ideas for consideration. The goal is to understand all the ideas well enough to weigh its merits.
6. Each person then votes in order to rank the ideas or solutions in order of merit. This is done anonymously. (Yellow stick-ums or sticky-dots are an excellent method of performing this rating task.) Those ideas receiving the highest ranks are adopted.



The nominal group approach has several advantages. Every idea or proposed solution gets a hearing. Group discussion, critique, and support are stimulating and encouraging. No one person, or small subgroup, can dominate the range of ideas considered. Although problems of status, authority, and power are not eliminated, the private ranking of ideas does minimize them. Research indicates that this technique is excellent for idea generation and decision-making.