

A VIEW FROM SUE UNERMAN

# ‘No idea is a bad idea’ is actually a bad idea

CONTENT STRATEGY TRANSFORMATION

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A study suggests that criticism could lead to more ideas during brainstorming.

“No idea is a bad idea” is one of the sacred rules of brainstorming.

The concept is based on the theory that ideas are like young plants. Rain too hard on them and they will wilt away. Don’t criticise. Warm them in the greenhouse of sunshine approval.

This is one of the founding rules laid down for brainstorming by BBDO’s [Alex Osborn](#) when he coined the term “brainstorm” in 1948 and is still widely employed today (together with the other rules, which are to emphasise quantity of ideas to allow freewheeling thinking and to build on the ideas of others). While other techniques for brainstorming sessions will vary, these rules usually prevail.

This is despite a relatively little-known study conducted in 2000 that seems to prove the opposite of what's accepted: criticism does not deter ideas. In fact, criticism encourages it.

In an academic experiment called *The Liberating Role of Conflict in Group Creativity* by Charlan Nemeth, individuals in small groups were given the problem of solving traffic congestion. The research was conducted in San Francisco and Paris. The rules were the same as usual, except for a test group who was told to feel free to debate and even to criticise each other's ideas.

Most creativity coaches and moderators would predict that allowing criticism and challenges would be the death of ideas. In fact, in these carefully controlled conditions, the reverse was true. Allowing debate led to more ideas – significantly more.

These results may seem surprising. However, given the two requirements for creativity, they actually are no surprise.

The first requirement is diversity of thinking. The second is authenticity; to be yourself.

If people in the brainstorm are similar in how they think rather than being diverse individuals, it might make for an easier – and perhaps happier – session, but there will be fewer different ideas.

Furthermore, if the people in the brainstorm are not similar in how they think, but have been asked to follow a rule that they must not criticise, they might become self-censoring to ensure a happy and obedient session. The effort required in trying not to offend others through a spontaneous negative reaction can suppress creativity.

This doesn't mean that criticism is a must; just that people shouldn't have to stop themselves being critical. The "don't rain on ideas" rule ought to be replaced by a "don't take criticism personally" mandate. Everyone should be free to be themselves and say what they really think, with courtesy and kindness, but also with the courage of their convictions.

Think hard before your next idea-generation session. Is it a required outcome that people have a good time? If so, keep to the standard rules. If there a real need for creativity and a diverse range of solutions, it's definitely worth breaking the "no idea is a bad idea" rule.

Nemeth has said that she believes disagreements open the mind: "Faced with an alternative conception of reality and a different way of thinking, we actually search for and consider more options."

More options, more ideas, more creativity, more chance of truly transformational action.

*This article was first published by Campaign, and can be read [here](#).*

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