

## BRAINSTORMING FOR BETTER DECISIONS IN COOPERATIVES

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**ABSTRACT:** *Cooperatives, in order to vie with private business rivals need to offer innovative products and services to its members at competitive terms. This calls for brainstorming, a meticulous approach prior to decision making at the General Assembly, involving a selective few from the general body, board of management, functional managers, and employees. This approach leads to an array of numerous assimilation of worthy innovative ideas to be presented at the General Body, so that one best alternative could be approved by the General Assembly. The methodology employed for this review is qualitative. The application of brainstorming in the decision making of cooperatives has been holistically made explicable by reviewing a wide array of pertinent archival records in the form of leading published books. Analysis is based on specific textual theoretical perspectives, as it outweighs the risk of irrelevant remarks.*

**KEYWORDS:** Brainstorming, Cooperatives, Decision-Making

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## INTRODUCTION

Cooperatives need to equivalently compete with private and government owned enterprises in a commercialized era characterized by cut-throat competition in business. Economic liberalization has sown the seeds of innovative approaches in the market place by offering innovative products and services at competitive terms. Here, the question is how cooperatives face the challenge of keeping their pace and race with such competing business setting. The way forward calls for a foolproof approach that leads to creative ideas in making their products and services swiftly marketable. The strength of Cooperatives is that they are democratic organizations, wherein, the decision making process is solely based on the voice of the majority of members made through casting of their respective votes. But, such best course of action to be pursued should culminate from a number of alternative and creative solutions generated first, rather than blindly passing decisions based on the available remedies. This noble exercise is well accomplished through the brainstorming workshops. With such an intent in mind, this review article is written to address the following questions, through a vast array of literature reviewed coupled with a two decades of rich experience in teaching, research and extension activities related to cooperatives:

- What is the relevance of brainstorming in the decision making process of cooperatives?
- What are the phases of brainstorming?
- What are the factors to be considered for effective brainstorming?
- When and where to apply the brainstorming in cooperatives?
- Who should find place in cooperative brainstorming workshops and why?

- How should the operating mechanics of brainstorming applied to decision making in cooperatives look like?
- What are the effective steps for using the brainstorming successfully;
- How the examination procedure of brainstorming looks like?

### **Brainstorming and its Relevance for Decision Making in Cooperatives**

Alex F. Osborn developed brainstorming as an aid to producing creative ideas for an advertising agency (Leslie W. Rue and Lloyd L. Byars, 2000). Brainstorming is, “a technique designed to foster group productivity by encouraging interacting group members to express their ideas in a non-critical fashion” (Jerald Greenberg and Robert A. Baron, 2005) which typically holds relevance in cooperatives, the organization of the people, for the people and by the people. Brainstorming, which emphasizes group thinking, was widely accepted after its introduction (Harald Koontz and Heinz Weilrich, 2004). Under this technique, a problem is assigned to a group of people and they are allowed to present large quantity of ideas or alternatives for solution to the problem, by following a definite procedure. These sessions are often called workshops. This creates ownership and involvement, and avoids the danger of solutions created by ‘outsiders’ and imposed on the staff (Grant Stewart, 2000), that is a distinctive reflection of cooperative way of doing the business, but with a special approach. Some companies utilize this technique as an integral part of the total value analysis procedure (Donald W. Dobler and David N. Burt, 1996), cooperatives are not an exception in that respect, as they are embodiments of cooperative and ethical values inherited from the founding fathers of the Cooperative movement. A number of studies on the effectiveness of the brainstorming approach have been conducted. Findings generally support the effectiveness of their approach in producing large number of novel solutions, (Louis E. Boone and David L. Kurtz, 1984) which reaps potential benefits in the form of better and productive sharing of ideas and performances, assessment of cultural factors, attitudes and belief-systems, accurate view of current business processes and information system needs, and in facilitating effective change management, which is the need of the hour for cooperatives to embark upon in their decision making process.

### **Phases of Brainstorming**

Brainstorming generally has three phases: generating alternatives, refining alternatives, and choosing an action-plan. Sometimes only the first phase is used (Bulin, 2001).

### **Factors to be considered for Effective Brainstorming**

According to Paul Bocij and others, brainstorming is an important technique in re-engineering a business, since it can identify new ways of approaching processes. They advocate the following factors to be carefully considered by the brainstorming analysts during their brainstorming sessions:

- Which person to involve and from which functional business areas;
- How many people to involve in the session- too few and insufficient data may be gathered; too many and the session may be too difficult to handle;
- Terms of reference for the session- there may need to be more than one session to identify clearly areas of agreement and those that need further discussion;

- Management involvement- a session for shop-floor workers, for example, may be far less successful in management personnel are involved than if they are not. It would be appropriate, however, for management groups to have their own brainstorming session so that tactical and strategic issues can be tackled rather than simply operational ones (Paul Bocij et.al, 1999). As to the cooperatives, the inference here is to warrant the presence of management body along with the general body, whenever crucial decisions are to be made, as they are the mouthpieces of the general body.

### **When to apply brainstorming in cooperatives?**

Cooperatives being democratic organisations, always base their crucial decisions based on the majority of votes casted in the General Assembly. Nevertheless, the significance of brainstorming should not be underestimated. So, with necessary cautions, this technique needs to be employed in decision making, with due inclusion of select few active, dedicated, well-informed, and contributing members, members of management body, functional managers and from employees, as it would make the session effective, efficient, and beneficial. As such application of this technique in cooperatives will arise in the following contexts:

1. In generating innumerable number of alternative courses of actions prior to decision making by the General Assembly;
2. In assimilating unique, novel and innovative ideas for giving a facelift to the products and services being dealt with by cooperatives, to be presented for approval by the General Assembly; and
3. In decisions related to tactical areas by management body and betterment of operational decisions related to the functional aspects of cooperative operations by functional managers.

### **Brainstorming- The Operating Mechanics**

The author makes an ideal attempt hereunder to explain the essential operating mechanics of brainstorming, one of the best group-problem solving techniques through a memorable mnemonic, "BRAINSTORMING".

- Basically brainstorming involves groups of five to ten members who meet and generate ideas in an ideal-interactive class/conference room setting (preferable if networked with computers) to solve creative problems under group leaders-cum-analysts (who facilitates sessions by posing typical questions like, "How can we use this differently", "How can we change?", "How can we substitute this?", or "How can we combine this?" and records every response then and there for analysis) in three different phases.
- Restricted operation, typically within strict guidelines, in all the three phases.
- All criticism is ruled out which reduces individual's fears of ridicule or failure; increases their enthusiasm, involvement and fair and free flow of ideas (sometimes sharing even far-out suggestions, since the goal is not the quality of ideas but the quantity of ideas).

- **Idea-evaluation (Judgment)** is withheld until the idea-generation process is over. Its premise is that if the evaluation of alternatives starts before all possible alternatives have been offered, valuable alternatives may be overlooked.
- **Non-intervention of ideas (freewheeling)** is encouraged.
- **Seeks better ideas** by encouraging as far as possible wilder or more radical ideas/comments.
- **The greater the number of ideas**, the greater the likelihood of obtaining a superior idea.
- **Obvious encouragement** to build one's own idea on another's idea.
- **Refining other's ideas** into better one by suggesting improvements is allowed.
- **Motivates 'hybrid ideas'** by encouraging combination of two or more of them.
- **Ideas are again reviewed** here for their merit as the second phase of brainstorming, which not only leads to better alternatives but also to weed out the ones with relatively little merit.
- **Now**, this is the third phase where one of the best alternatives is selected, frequently through group consensus.
- **Grasp/ get hold of the six golden tips** stated below to reap the best out of brainstorming (Adapted from John R. Schermerhorn, Jr, 1996)

### **Essential Tips for Using Brainstorming Successfully**

The rules of brainstorming are simple enough, but doing it effectively is not as easy as it seems. Many brainstorming sessions fail because people don't fully appreciate the finer points of how to conduct them. Following the guidelines stated below will help make your own brainstorming sessions more effective.

- ❖ **Brainstorm frequently**, at least once per month to ensure better practice, to make members feel at ease, and to be effective.
- ❖ **Make brainstorming sessions brief**, preferably less than an hour in length to avert exhaustion leading to less efficiency.
- ❖ **Write up the problem-topic** to be brainstormed clearly on a flipchart (not too broad or too narrow) to focus on the problem, and keep it in full view.
- ❖ **Write up the rules for brainstorming**, review them with the team and post these also where everyone can see them.
- ❖ **Warm up for a few minutes** with a practice brainstorming. It is helpful to use something simple, such as the uses of a paperclip, or a brick, or a wooden pencil etc.
- ❖ **Make sure that you have prepared for the session** (get well-versed and trained) in advance by reading up on the topic than to rush in-between sessions (to avoid thoughts getting dried and drained).

- ❖ Don't limit yourself to words-use props, i.e., to introduce objects to model/support your ideas.
- ❖ Choose a volunteer scribe to write up all the ideas on the flipchart as they are brainstormed. (Never pressurize anyone into being a scribe).
- ❖ Start the ideas coming (Incubate ideas) help each person identify those ideas he or she finds most useful.
- ❖ Maintain a 'cheerleader' role with the team keeping up the momentum for ideas.
- ❖ Make it fun. Laughter is often a sign of creativity.
- ❖ Don't forget to "build" and "jump" (allow building ideas on other's ideas so that it forms into a new idea, in turn).
- ❖ When the team dries up, try to get more ideas of your own, urging them on, or by selecting the wildest idea and building on it.
- ❖ Reverse brainstorming. Think of all the things that could go wrong with the ideas the team has selected (Based on Kelley. T, 1998).

### Examination Procedure

Two sets of questions are asked. First the *primary set of questions* to indicate the facts and reasons underlying the subject examined, and the *secondary questions* to indicate alternatives and consequently the means of improvements. The questions are asked under five headings, which examines the purpose of operation or event, place where it is done, person by whom it is done and the sequence in which it is carried out and the means by which the operation is carried out.

### Primary questions

- i. **Purpose:** The question is *what is achieved?* And *is it necessary?* And *why?* Is asked to challenge the existence of the action. The answer will guide us to remove this operation or to improve the operation or to include this as it is in the proposed method or to combine the operation with any other event.
- ii. **Place:** The questions are *where it is done?* And *why there?* These questions help us to find alternate place for the work to have a better environment or to have a better layout.
- iii. **Sequence:** *When it is done?* And *why then?* Questions asked regarding the sequence of operation with reference to other operations would enable us to develop a better sequence of carrying out the operation or combining the operation with some other operation.
- iv. **Person:** This question refers to the person performing the activity. *Who does it?* And *why that person?* This question will help us to know why a particular person is chosen for the work.
- v. **Means:** Finally, the means of carrying out the activity is challenged by asking *how is it done?* And *why that way?*

## Secondary questions

The secondary questions seek to establish suitable alternatives to existing or previously proposed method. While doing so, we may get many numbers of alternatives. To select one particular alternative once again a third question is asked. The questions are shown below:

**Purpose:** *What else could be done? And what should be done?*

**Place:** *Where else could be done? And where should it be done?*

**Sequence:** *When else could it be? And when it should be done?*

**Person:** *Who else could do it? And who should do it?*

**Means:** *How else could it be done? And how should it be done?*

The answers to these questions indicate the lines along which a new method for the overall process should be developed. A further examination of proposed alternative may give us a better way of doing work. These questions may be tabulated as under for a detailed and better understanding (Ramamoorthy. P, 2002).

The present facts (Primary questions)	Alternatives (Secondary Questions)
1. <b>Purpose:</b> What is achieved? Is it necessary? Yes/No.	<b>What else could be done? What?</b>
2. <b>Place:</b> Where is it done? Why there?	<b>Where else could it be done? Where?</b>
3. <b>Sequence:</b> When is it done? Why then?	<b>When else could it be done? When?</b>
4. <b>Person:</b> Who does it? Why that person?	<b>Who else could do it? Who?</b>
5. <b>Means:</b> How is it done? Why that way?	<b>How else could it be done? How?</b>

## Innovation in Brainstorming

Managements should also take note of and keep pace with recent development in brainstorming, popularly known as ‘electronic brainstorming’, which lets group members interact via groupware (a type of software) and PCs instead of face-to-face. It has also been widely acknowledged that such recent electronically based brainstorming has resulted in yielding relatively larger number of high-quality ideas generated by the groups, as compared with face-to-face brainstorming groups.

## CONCLUSION

Cooperatives should come out from the conventional ways of seeking answers to their problems in a haphazard traditional style characterized by huge hues and cries in the General



Body with folded wrists and fists. Embarking in scientific decision making techniques, indeed has a lot to offer for the development of cooperatives. What matters is the will and commitment of all concerned to apply these modern decision making techniques without compromising the underlying values of cooperatives. Irrespective of the sizes, purposes, forms, levels, and years of establishment, all cooperatives can venture brainstorming in their decision making. As to electronic brainstorming, regulatory bodies governing cooperative movement at the national, regional, and city administration levels and economically self-reliant and self-sustained cooperatives at apex levels could give it a try, if we really look forward to a vibrant cooperative movement in the days to come.

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