maestro

Brainstorm Better Learning Solutions

A GUIDE TO INSPIRE NEW THINKING

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WHAT'S INSIDE

Why a guide? Isn't brainstorming simple?

We know what you might be thinking: "A guide to brainstorming? Really?" Hear us out: for many, the status quo is to simply call a meeting with the brightest minds on the team and popcorn ideas around. The idea of a guide for brainstorming may seem like an over-engineered solution at first, but stick with us—it could be just what your team needs to push the boundaries of their creativity and innovation.

Brainstorming is likely one of the most important activities your team does. For most, it's the go-to tool for solving their biggest problems—problems that demand more than one solitary thinker. Don't subject your most important learning challenges to a haphazard process or the dangers of groupthink. There's a better way to brainstorm.
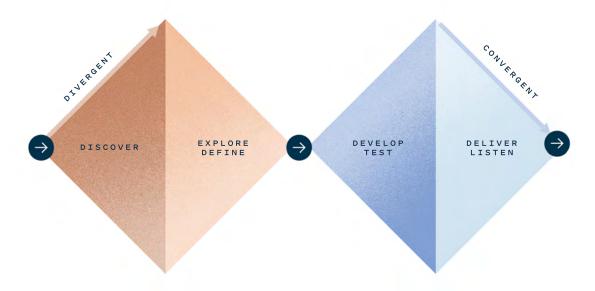

That's why we created this guide: because brainstorming is too important to be left to chance. Using the process and tools in this guide, you'll be able to prepare your team to think more deeply about problems and more collaboratively about solutions. This guide is a peek behind the curtain at how Maestro brainstorms and delivers solutions that challenge the status quo and meet learners where they are.

Still not sure? Give this process a try for a couple of months. After experiencing the dynamic discussions and novel ideas it generates, we're confident you'll never want to go back to the way you used to brainstorm.

Philosophy: the Double Diamond framework

Maestro's approach to brainstorming learning solutions is built on the Double Diamond framework, a tried-and-true process model in the design world. The core idea behind the Double Diamond is separating the very different focuses of problem finding from problem solving, and divergent thinking from convergent thinking. Take a look below to get a better idea of what we mean.

The first diamond represents problem finding (or research) and asking ourselves, "Are we designing the right thing?" The second diamond represents problem solving (or design) and asking ourselves, "Are we designing things right?" *Our Learning Environment Analysis*, or LEA, is our take on how to answer the question posed by the first diamond.

From there, each diamond is further separated into halves by alternating phases of divergent and convergent thinking. The upward trajectory of each diamond is labeled as divergent thinking. During these divergent phases, the focus is on generating as many options and as much information as possible. There is no grooming or judging ideas until each diamond reaches its peak and moves into a convergent phase of thinking.

During the convergent phases, the focus shifts to taking the information generated during the divergent phase and analyzing it to reach an outcome or actionable next step. Since divergent and convergent thinking call for very different mindsets, it is critical that these two steps remain distinct and separate. One of the easiest ways to snuff out innovation and creativity is to start judging information or ideas as they emerge.

So, knowing that our second diamond represents problem solving and that the first phase of the diamond promotes divergent thinking, we can label it as "develop." As you'll see in the guide that follows, our brainstorming approach is specifically designed to fit into this "develop" phase of the Double Diamond framework, helping to maximize the quantity and quality of solution ideas that we brainstorm.

Recruit and brief-in the brainstorm team

PURPOSE

Preparation is what makes or breaks a brainstorm session. Dedicate time to recruiting the right people and getting them prepped for a successful session. What will it take to inspire the most creativity out of your team?

RECRUITING THE TEAM

It all starts with the brainstorm team. We recommend recruiting a relatively small team of diverse individuals. A team of four to six is the sweet spot—fewer than that and there can be a lack of ideas, more than that and it becomes difficult for individuals to feel enough ownership to share their ideas. When it comes to backgrounds, we recommend individuals up and down the organization and with a variety of backgrounds.

WORRIED ABOUT BRAINSTORM FATIGUE?

Brainstorm fatigue is a very real thing that can lead to stale ideas, so push yourself to build a bench of 10–12 brainstormers from which you can mix and match for a variety of challenges. Another solution to keep energy in a brainstorm session is to ask for volunteers. The energy of someone who opted into a brainstorm often outweighs that of someone with a trusted perspective but too many demands on their time to participate fully.

BRIEFING THE TEAM

Once you have your team assembled, it's important to brief them on the project. This is best done by scheduling a 15-minute meeting with the brainstorm team anywhere from two to five days in advance of the actual brainstorm session. This short brief-in meeting allows you to review the brief together, answer any questions the team has about the challenge, and set the expectation that they start thinking about ideas over the next several days.

We've found that the most effective brainstorm brief leverages the *Learning Environment Analysis (LEA)* findings report. See the example below for our recommended brief template. Remember to complete learner research through an LEA before you get to brainstorming so that you're filling in this brief with information that you actually uncovered as opposed to making assumptions about your learners.

CAN I SKIP THE BRIEF-IN?

In a pinch, you can forgo this step, but we don't recommend it. You'll find that some team members will not find the time to review the brief on their own, which leads to brainstorming ideas that are detached from the problem. It may also force you to reallocate precious brainstorm time to review the brief for the few who were unprepared.

Brainstorm brief template

01 NATURE OF THE CHALLENGE

Problem statement

Problem statement insights

Supporting insight #1

Supporting insight #2

Supporting insight #3

Proposed success criteria

Kirkpatrick level 1 criteria

Kirkpatrick level 2 criteria

Kirkpatrick level 3 criteria

Kirkpatrick level 4 criteria

02 LEARNER PROFILE

Profile

How they view their role

Previous experience

Tensions and motivations

Week-in-the-life

Learning journey map

Moment of recognition of learning need

First resource accessed and experience

Application and outcomes

Subsequent resources accessed and experience

Application and outcomes

03 CONSTRAINTS

Business constraints

Budget

Learner time investment

Target launch date

Launch support and long-term support

Technical Constraints

Learning design capabilities

LMS requirements

Outcome measurement tools

Set the brainstorm rules

PURPOSE

As we discussed earlier, the intent of brainstorming is to promote divergent thinking and allow you to solve the challenge at hand with the best solution possible. But as human beings, we're often quick to evaluate and critique. Without rules for brainstorming, it's easy for any group to get caught up in challenging one another's ideas, which can cause some participants to shut down. Instead, you want to foster a safe space that promotes creative thinking.

PREPARING PROMPTS

There are three main things that we believe a set of brainstorm rules should accomplish:

01 | They create a safe space for individuals to share ideas without fear of being critiqued or having to defend them. To do this, we recommend including a "Yes, and…" thinking statement. Taken from the world of improv, "Yes, and…" means that no one is allowed to question whether an idea would work or how it would be implemented. They are only allowed to agree with the idea and build on it. The critiquing of ideas happens later in the Double Diamond framework as a second phase of the brainstorming process.

02 | They encourage wild ideas. This might be accomplished by reminding your brainstormers that at this stage, innovation is highly valued and they should have fun with the activity. We reinforce this by using phrases like "the quantity of ideas drives the probability of finding a quality idea" and "don't prejudge anything—if it comes to mind, write it down."

03 | They ensure the brainstormers understand their mission. Even with the above steps, brainstormers sometimes put pressure on themselves to not share ideas that would be considered impractical. Remind the brainstormers that their opinions matter and that openly sharing will lead to ideas that impact the lives of learners for the better.

APPLYING BRAINSTORM RULES

When it comes to applying your brainstorm rules, it's fairly simple: review the rules at the beginning and then reinforce them throughout.

01 | **REVIEW:** Before diving into the brainstorm activities or prompts that you've created, take a moment to review the rules by reading them out loud. Give everyone the chance to ask any questions that they may have.

02 | **REINFORCE:** Once you've started brainstorming, work to ensure the rules are lived up to. If someone critiques someone else's idea, gently remind them of the need for "Yes, and…" thinking. If it starts to feel like people are playing it safe, consider improvising and asking brainstormers to start off the next prompt by sharing their craziest ideas first.

Set the brainstorm rules

Want some inspiration? Here are the rules that we review at Maestro before every brainstorm exercise. They're rooted in *our company's core values* and promote the brainstorming principles that we mentioned on the previous page.

LIVE BOLDLY.

Don't prejudge your ideas! If it comes to mind, write it down and share it out loud!

WONDER MORE.

What else? Prioritize quantity over quality for this brainstorm.

LEAD WITH HEART.

Remember that something really small can make a big difference for a learner. No idea or detail is too little to share.

TAKE OWNERSHIP.

We're counting on you to stay engaged in the discussion and make it as productive as possible.

CHECK YOUR EGO.

This is a "Yes, and…" space. We don't critique or evaluate ideas on the spot.

Prepare the prompts and activities

In this step, you're preparing the prompts and activities to which your brainstormers will respond. You're actively working to encourage divergent thinking through all of your prompts. And in some of your prompts, you're looking to pull through key information from the brief so that the ideas generated are rooted in actual needs demanded by the situation or audience.

PREPARING PROMPTS

For a one-hour brainstorm session with four to six participants, we recommend preparing around seven prompts with the expectation that you will make it through about four of them. This gives you the flexibility to draw from the other prompts in your reserve based on how the ideas are flowing and where you believe the conversation should lead next.

SAMPLE PROMPTS

Review the list below to get a glimpse of some of the prompts the Maestro team has used in the past. But don't just copy and paste this list for your own purposes. It's important that the prompts you design and select be thoughtful and relevant to the challenge you're trying to solve.

Warm-up

Topic-specific (topic designated in **bold**)

> What's an example you've seen of good **teamwork**? Maybe a time when a team came together to become more than the sum of its parts?

> Who is a **leader** you deeply respect and admire? What are some behaviors this person exhibited? What are some things they did not do?

Learning-specific

> What's something you recently learned or attempted to learn? Walk us through your experience!

> What's a new piece of technology, an app, or a website that's changing the way you go about your day-to-day routine?

Learning tools

Kolb's model

> What if the solution had to follow all four steps of "tell-show-do-review"? What would it look like?

> What if we couldn't use formal training and learners had to rely on only "do-and-review?" What would that solution look like?

Learning ecology matrix

> What if the solution had to be a game?

> What if the solution had to be entirely self-navigated?

Content treatment

> What if we had to tell a story with a hero, conflict, and resolution?

> What if we had to rely mostly on graphics and not on written or spoken word?

Constraints

> What if learners only had 5 minutes at a time?

> What if we had half the budget for a solution?

> What if learners couldn't use any digital tech?

Facilitate a brainstorm session

This is where the rubber hits the road. All of your diligent preparation has led to this. This is your moment to create an environment where you bring out the best (ideas!) in others.

SAMPLE BRAINSTORM SESSION AGENDA

Length: ~ 1 hour

Flow:
- Answer any questions since the previous brief-in meeting
- Review brainstorm rules
- Share prompt
    - 2–4 minutes of independent writing
    - 7–10 minutes of sharing and discussion
    - Facilitator captures ideas throughout
    - Repeat for multiple prompts as time allows
- Thank everyone for their contributions and close the meeting

BRAINSTORM SESSION APPROACH

Whether virtual or in-person, in general, we recommend a simple writing-based brainstorm approach. For each prompt or activity, give the group anywhere from two to four minutes and allow them to write as much as possible during that time.

Once time runs out, go around the room and have each brainstormer share one of their ideas. If there are impressions of seniority within the group, we suggest not starting with the most senior person. After each person has shared, thank them for their contribution and ask others in the group if they have anything to add on to the idea that was just shared.

By having each person write down their ideas independently and share one at a time, it simultaneously helps individuals commit to sharing their ideas and counteracts groupthink by keeping each idea separate and distinct.

FACILITATION APPROACH

As you get further into the brainstorm session, you may find yourself needing to steer things in a certain direction. If you don't understand someone's idea or feel like someone is staying surface-level, consider saying, "Tell me more about that" or asking any number of questions that might help uncover more information.

If others are staying quiet during discussion, consider moving to them for their contributions sooner than you had planned. If they continue to stay quiet, you might explicitly ask them if they can further build on an idea that was just shared.

Finally, your biggest responsibility is to encourage "Yes, and…" thinking. Ensure that brainstormers are building on each other's ideas and thinking creatively. Your role as a facilitator is impactful, so don't hang back. When possible, lead by example and make your own additions to others' ideas or find connections between two separate ideas.

QUANTITY DRIVES QUALITY

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**Interested in partnering up to design your next learning solution?
We'd love to work with you and brainstorm a game-changing solution for
your learners. Reach out to connect with a strategist!**

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