

Conducting a Brain-Storming Session¹ (BSS)

1. Introduction Whilst there are many reasons for conducting a BSS, each reason should be carefully considered prior to its use. A BSS should not be used to make corporate decisions nor to analyse and deliver management decisions. It can however, be used in the collection of best ideas that management may use in order to decide corporate direction and/or to ease decision making.

2. Who should be present A BSS must be carefully engineered in order to have the correct forum of personnel present. Selection should be a process of elimination and attendees should be selected. Availability, although fortunate, does not always mean most suited attend. Staff who have little interest in corporate events should be excluded as their attendance may jeopardise the team and sensible suggestions. Failure to select a suitable quorum will result in ineffective solutions and will hinder future 'role on' BSS'.

3. Define the Scope To have a BSS without defining the scope is letting personnel stroll aimlessly down the garden path. A BSS **MUST** have a definitive problem with a designated time allocated to it. NO suggestions of possible solutions should be mentioned as this will only influence thought and influence the direction of the BSS.

4. Make the BSS worthwhile Most problems encountered have already been identified and solved elsewhere. Where this is the case, simply adopt the best practice and continue. BSS' are often time consuming and financially draining – why reinvent the wheel for each and every 'new' problem? Also, some problems do not easily lend themselves to BSS', instead; perhaps a computer generated model is the most ideal. This process is more reliable and faster if requiring analytical information. BSS' should not be used if you have in the past circumvented this problem, have a solution or require statistical data.

5. Managing the Session Once you have clearly identified the problem and decided that a BSS is the only way to advance, what should you do?

5.1 Select a leader for the BSS. This person is, in effect the Chairman and opens/directs the BSS. Ideally, this person should be a FACILITATOR an able manager of time, resources and people. At times, he/she will need to be assertive in order to put the discussion back on track – or indeed, move the discussions along.

5.2 Select Attendance As already mentioned, selecting individuals that happen to be available or at a loose end is not always the best action. Select people from within the organisation that are able to

¹ Also known as a 'Thought Shower' Session

express themselves and may/may not be associated/affected by the eventual outcome. Refrain from picking friends/colleagues that you know you get along with. Instead, select a broad range of people with differing characters. Groups can range from 5 – 40.

5.3 Allocate a suitable amount of time This area is a judgement call. However, if people have too long; it proves expensive and suggestions invariably 'dry up'. Usually the topic, forum size and importance of a solution dictates the amount of time allocated to a BSS.

6. Preparing for the Session As the old saying goes 'good preparation is key to success' and 'fail to plan – plan to fail' (I'm sure you can roll a few off the tongue too). Therefore, planning is critical.

6.1 Prepare the Room and Equipment Room selection is inevitably down to availability. However, a room without clutter and distraction often works best. Prepare the whiteboard so that all attendees can see – without interference and that there is ample consumables available (pens, paper, pens, markers etc).

6.2 Seating Arrangements If you are going to break the group down into syndicates, make sure there is sufficient space available. If you are not, my suggestion is that you have a proud seating arrangement (in a circle) so that all attendees feel equal and all can see (at ease) each other. Seating in this fashion positively encourages comment and absorbs all attendees into discussion.

6.3 Volume Care has to be taken to allow all attendees an equal voice. Manage people effectively in order to avoid raised voices or 'over-talking' others. Only one person should be allowed to express their views at a time. If necessary raised hands can be adopted.

6.4 Aids If visual aids add/encourage/explain the problematic area, have sufficient of them to hand around. Alternatively, printouts, leaflets or a projection onto the wall will suffice. Hand on is often more effective than receiving an explanation.

6.5 Discussion Secretary It is VITAL that information given is recorded – ALL INFORMATION. Do nothing to dampen dialogue even if the suggestion has already been made or appears wrong. Encourage free speech and record it verbatim. Often this can be taken in turns by attendees and a conference pad used. Again, DO NOT use a white board and rub off the suggestions when new 'note space' is required.

7. Conduct the BSS This is what all the preparation has been about.

7.1 Conduct Manage conduct throughout the BSS by gentle management and persuasion without inference to solutions. Encourage participation and thank people for their suggestions – regardless of what they say.

7.2 **Accurate Recording** Without this the meeting is pointless. Make notes, go over unclear areas and define points being made. Once this has been done, accurate decisions can be made.

7.3 **Avoid Rabbit Holes** Make sure, if talking about the most suitable stapler, someone doesn't turn the meeting into a general discussion of all forms of stationery. This wastes times and achieves nothing in terms of solving your immediate problem. If this occurs, gently push the topic back on track and continue.

8. **Success** This depends on correctly defining the problem, careful selection and accurate recording of information discussed. Do this and the solution or best course of action will appear! Good Luck

