

Assessing Leadership Needs Among Extension Educators

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Introduction

Brainstorming is arguably the most commonly used idea generation technique within businesses, government, and organizations (Nijstad, Stroebe, & Lodewijckx, 2003; Rawlinson, 2017). Brainstorming involves group members collectively generating ideas that may not arise solely from individual thought by building off other expressed ideas (Gallupe, Bastianutti, & Cooper, 1991). Traditional brainstorming is a technique for generating as many ideas as possible to solve a problem that includes two phases: idea generation and idea evaluation (DeVito, 1982; Putman & Paulus, 2011). Traditional brainstorming increases learning, creativity, and productivity (Al-Samarraie & Hurmuzan, 2018); helps participants more easily contribute in a less formal environment (Brahm & Kleiner, 1996); and is low in cost (Brahm & Kleiner, 1996). However, scholars also roundly criticize brainstorming. Traditional brainstorming has been thought to impede idea generation (Diehl & Stroebe, 1987; Gallupe, Bastianutti, & Cooper, 1991; Sample, 1984) and produce fewer ideas due to lack of participation (social loafing), fear of being evaluated by others in the group, and production blocking (Gallupe, Bastianutti, & Cooper, 1991). Group brainstorming is not more effective than individual brainstorming (Nijstad et al., 2003). Previous research confirmed that individuals outperform groups because during a traditional brainstorming technique session, a group can reduce the number of ideas contributed by individuals (Diehl & Stroebe, 1987; Nijstad et al., 2003). The purpose of this innovative poster is to introduce conference participants to this modified brainstorming technique. This practical application illustrates its usefulness as an assessment tool. We created the modified brainstorming technique to eliminate challenges identified in the literature. Research suggests that individuals, not groups, produce better quality brainstorming (Rossiter & Lilien, 1994). Our modified brainstorming technique capitalizes on the creativity at the individual level and helps maximize the contribution of the whole group.

How the Modified Brainstorming Technique Works.

We hosted a modified brainstorming technique session to assess Extension administrators' perceptions of leadership development opportunities, barriers, and needs of Extension educators. We believe our modified brainstorming technique both maximizes the individual's contributions toward idea generation and fosters creativity among individual group participants. When using the modified brainstorming technique, researchers should first identify which problems or prompts to address during the modified brainstorming technique session. No more than three should be used to keep the session under 30 minutes. The technique includes 4 phases, including 1) individual contribution, 2) individual contribution based on peer reviewed results, 3) researchers' analysis, and 4) participants rating responses online. In Phase 1, participants reflect on problems or prompts and generate ideas at the individual level. In Phase 2, participants work individually in silence and provide a peer-review of two other participants' responses, which helps generate new ideas. For Phase 3, researchers independently evaluate participants' responses through qualitative analysis. For Phase 4, researchers ask participants to rate results online. This helps evaluate and synthesize generated ideas. During the poster session, we will provide two handouts we prepared: a facilitator guide and participant's worksheet. The facilitator guide can be used during the session to stay on track, and participants complete prompts on the provided worksheet. The facilitator guide provides script prompts and the amount of time to complete each step. The participants' worksheet provides space for participants' own ideas and for ideas generated during the peer review phase.

Results

We used the modified brainstorming technique with nine Penn State University Extension administrators. Participants brainstormed on three prompts. What leadership opportunities are available to Extension educators? What limitations and barriers are associated with the leadership development of Extension educators? What leader and leadership knowledge and skills do Extension educators need to improve for strengthening their work with Extension program teams, local communities, and individuals? We used a qualitative approach to analyze data from the nine participants. The themes emerged from the participants' brainstorming activity. The unit of analysis were words, phrases, or sentences on the participants' worksheets. We utilized a triangulation method to analyze data generating subthemes and group them into themes. The triangulation approach helped validate findings (Armstrong, Gosling, Weinman, & Marteau, 1997). Themes emerged from participants' responses. Participants identified the following available peer-leadership opportunities for educators: leadership roles as program leaders; team leaders; project leaders; and officer positions in state, regional and national associations. Participants cited promotion opportunities, professional mentoring, and financial resources as barriers and organizational policy limitations impeding educators' leadership development. Also, participants provided time management, lack of advanced degree, and lack of motivation as examples of individual-level barriers to leadership development. Participants said educators need intrapersonal leadership development relate to topics such as self-awareness, self-motivation, and self-regulation. Participants also identified interpersonal leadership development needs, related to topics such as social awareness, social skills, visioning, and communication.

Implications

We completed the first three phases of the technique. Researchers plan to ask participants to rate generated ideas online. After generated ideas are rated by participants, researchers will evaluate and finalize the results of the modified brainstorming technique. We identified the following potential benefits of utilizing our newly created modified brainstorming technique: capitalizes on individual creativity and helps maximize the contribution of the whole group; eliminates negative criticism from peers, which allows all ideas to be viewed as equally important in the problem-solving and/or idea generation procedure, not time-intensive, effective for small groups (i.e., like Extension administrative teams, Extension program teams, and Extension program advisory boards, because they are easier to manage, which helps keep the session at 30 minutes), and provides justification for further investigation or decision-making.

These advantages can help incite more efficient and engaged collaboration when conducting needs assessments in Extension and other non-profit organizations.

Future Use, Advice to Others, and Resources Needed

Not putting a limit on the numbers of idea to be generated affected effectiveness some individual's contribution was identify as a challenge of the modified technique. Other outreach and non-profit organizations would be able to model and apply this technique as well when working with leadership groups and advisory boards. Again, the facilitator guide and worksheet template should be used when planning and conducting a modified brainstorming technique assessment. These items can be obtained from the authors. Following the prompts on the facilitator guide and only addressing less than three problems or prompts during the session will help keep the session at 30 minutes.

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