

## **Beyond Brainstorms**

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## **Linda Joy Mitchell suggests some ways to make our conversations more creative**

*“That’ll never work round here. The committee just won’t stand for it.”*

Another idea squashed before we know if it was destined to be a weed or a flower. We don’t mean our words to have a crushing effect, but these sorts of negative casual remarks in meetings or informal chats, can stop us from doing things differently.

Our conversations are so much more than an exchange of information; they shape how we see the world, how we behave and what we accept as possible. Because the words we use are so powerful, we need to pay attention to them, and the spirit with which we use them. Many of our conversations could benefit from a healthy dose of creativity.

Creative conversations open up new opportunities, inspiring us to find better ways of doing things. By their very nature they are chaotic and produce lots of possibilities only some of which will ever have real potential. But we have to get better at giving new ideas a chance to thrive in the first place.

Creativity is all about change, which always involves some risk. Change can sometimes make us feel anxious and nervous, but it’s important to stretch ourselves and imagine the unknown. Controlling our own personal reactions to change and risk is an important step to having more creative interactions with people. You might worry whether people will join in, but if you start slowly, perhaps by stepping outside of your comfort zone for just one meeting, you will almost certainly reap some rewards. Here are some ideas to get you started.

- Reduce the formality of some of your meetings. Some truly inspirational conversations stop dead the minute an agenda hits the table. Try to reduce the number of agenda items by half to give some space to the discussions you don’t usually have time for.

- Encourage people to speak from their hearts rather than saying the things they know might be most 'polite' or 'politic'. Have open discussions about the organisation's culture, values and beliefs. Ask what matters, then ask *why* it matters.
- Ban killer phrases like '*yes but*'. Insist on '*yes and*' instead. Appoint a 'watchperson' to challenge anyone who cuts short an idea. Use a red flag or a party popper to highlight killer comments with humour.
- Build creative games and exercises into meetings. You could use a standard dictionary in your brainstorm sessions. When discussions get stuck, randomly select a word from the dictionary and try to relate the discussion to that word. For example, how does service delivery relate to zebras?
- Try to look at things in another way. Reverse the problem, change its scale or size, add or take something away. Look at it through another person's eyes, for example a service user, and see if your perspective changes.
- Choose to *only* focus on the positive and the exciting for at least part of the meeting. Many of us spend far too much time analysing (and bemoaning) our problems and failures, and far too little identifying positive achievements. Encourage people to tell stories about the best things they have done and what happened as a result. Try and capture these life giving forces and themes.
- 'Vision the future' by asking people to suspend their disbelief and imagine a time when everything they wanted to happen was happening. What would it be like, how would it feel, what would they be seeing and experiencing?

Try to feed your creative conversations and ideas into concrete decisions and action plans. Not all your ideas will take off, but remember to keep everyone who was involved in the initial discussion informed about your progress. Use an external facilitator if you need a hand to get started, or talk to other organisations about how they do it.

Finally, to have really effective creative conversations you also need to *listen* really well. Ask questions that 'get underneath' the things people are saying on the surface. Remember to be aware of your own emotional reactions to ideas. Others might also have a creative point and it might just be *your own reaction* that is getting in the way of that eureka moment.

## Learn more

There are a number of resources available to help you go beyond the typical brainstorm. Here are Linda's recommendations:

- Breakthrough Thinking for Non Profit Organizations: Creative Strategies for Extraordinary Results, Bernard Ross and Clare Segal – “A good read on creativity and performance improvement.”
- Six Thinking Hats, Edward De Bono – “A fun introduction to different meeting styles and thinking methods.”