



How to Use Question-Storming to Innovate

...a better way than brainstorming when innovating

by [Andrew Cooke](#), [Blue Sky GPS \(Growth & Profit Solutions\)](#)

The idea of brain-storming is to get a group of diverse people to generate a lot of ideas, without judgement, in order to discover a solution to a problem. It has its use at times, but the problem is that it doesn't work!

Why do I say this?

There are two key problems with brain-storming. Firstly, the problem starts at the beginning when we look to solve a problem rather than to find a problem. We have already defined what the problem is we believe that we "know" what the problem is when we do not. Next time you are in a brain-storming session, before you start, ask everyone to write down, without sharing what they have written), what the problem is that they are going to brainstorm. You will get as many answers as there are people. Although there may be aspects of the problem that people share there is no commonly shared and consistent understanding of the problem.

Secondly, although there may be no judgement of ideas in the initial stage of brain-storming a lot of people will tend to self-censor as they know the ideas will be judged at some point. This limits the creative thinking and the ability for people to think freely.

[The Right Question Institute](#) has developed the question-storming method where the focus is on generating questions, not ideas, which tend to be judged more harshly than questions. When people brain-storm there is a point when people can't think of any more ideas. Part of this is because the group is asking the wrong questions – this is a good time to start question-storming.

The Right Question Institute has developed a process for this, the *Question Formulation Technique*, which includes the following steps:

1. Design a question focus.

Here you provide a focus for the group so that people can generate their *own* questions.



2. Produce questions.

There are four rules for producing questions:

- A. Ask as many questions as you can.
- B. Do not stop to judge, discuss, edit, or answer any question.
- C. Write down every question exactly as it was asked.
- D. Change any statements into questions.

As a group generate at least fifty questions about the problem being "stormed". Write down all the questions so that everyone can see them and try to think of a better question.

Questions tend to be easier than ideas to come up with. Note that just because you have thought of a question does not mean you have to have a solution for it.

As you go through this you will find that people have slightly different ways of framing or approaching the problem. If you have a large group then split the group into smaller sub-groups to encourage interaction between people.

Often groups stall at around 25 questions. Don't stop here as often the best questions come as you get to the fiftieth or seventy-fifth.

3. Work with closed-ended and open-ended questions.

Improve the questions generated by:

- a. Making open questions closed, and
- b. Making closed questions open

For example:

From		To
<i>How can we make the same profit at half the margin?</i>	Open to Closed	<i>Can we make the same profit at half the margin?</i>
<i>Do we focus on a different customer group?</i>	Closed to Open	<i>What other customer groups should we think about focusing on?</i>



4. Prioritize questions.

Allow the group to prioritize the top three questions that need to be explored further. The reversing of the questions helps to winnow down the questions as the best questions become magnetic and draw people to them. So people converge around them. From this the group can discern which questions are the top three questions that need to be addressed.

5. Plan next steps.

Use the three questions to help you develop ideas and solutions for the problem.

6. Reflect.

Stop and reflect on what you have learnt, found out and developed as a result of this process. What do you need to do next and what plans do you need to develop.

So next time you are looking to innovate, solve problems or come up with a new way of doing things don't look for the right answer, look for the right question!

About Andrew Cooke

Andrew Cooke is the director and founder of Blue Sky GPS and is known for his work with executives, managers and teams in helping them to grow, develop and achieve results. Using a blend of consulting, facilitation and coaching he is noted for his ability in "bringing people potential to life". Andrew takes the time to understand and assist successful business executives in creating a customized plan that allows them grow and develop their leadership effectiveness. In doing this he guides executives to manage, direct and make change work for them and their stakeholders and teams in an increasing volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous business environment. From this he helps others to become more successful in both what they do and how they do it.

Andrew demonstrates a proactive attitude and empathy that blends enthusiasm, energy and a pragmatic approach in engaging leaders and their stakeholders. He has over thirty years of international business experience and insights on which to draw, and has worked with blue-chip clients and other leading businesses across a range of industries. Andrew is passionate about helping others to be more successful personally and professionally.

Qualifications & Accreditations

Andrew is an experienced international expert in executive coaching, leadership development and business consulting. He has qualifications, certifications and accreditations from recognized leading global organizations, including:



Blue Sky GPS
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"Bringing people potential to life"

- International executive coach with certifications for Marshall Goldsmith Stakeholder Centered Coaching and Global Leader of the Future 360⁰ Assessment
- Masters of Business Administration (MBA), London Business School, UK
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- Diploma from the Institute of Marketing (UK)
- Accredited DISC Facilitator & Coach