
The Risks of Brainstorm Negotiating



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Throwing all your ideas onto the table can put you at risk of revealing too much and giving the other party an advantage. But careful brainstorming at crucial points of the negotiation can yield more value all round.

Many of those who teach win-win negotiation theory advise negotiators to brainstorm options to increase creativity and value creation. Brainstorming can uncover many options for one or more interests by generating a list contributed by its members without any trace of judgment or commitment. While brainstorming is a great creativity tool for groups who are working together, it can be risky if the members of such a group also have a competitive tension between them, as in most negotiations.

Brainstorming can increase the number of options available, improve the spirit of collaboration among the parties, enhance their potential to find new value, expand the pie and thus get better outcomes. However, brainstorming's effectiveness for enlarging the pie for value creation purposes is not without risks for the value claiming phase of the negotiation.

The lack of filters and rapid fire approach of brainstorming could reveal too much about the parties' limits or possibilities. As a result, they may end up giving the counterparty a potential information advantage when it comes to value claiming (dividing up the pie). The fact that an idea is brainstormed hints to the counterparty that the originator of the idea can and probably has the resources to make the idea happen.

In addition, the counterparty may play the brainstorming strategically and opportunistically, pretending to collaborate, but playing it safe and revealing just enough to keep the first party excited to continue brainstorming and thus revealing more information. Directly or indirectly, the counterparty may be collecting information that can be later used to ask for more or to put pressure on the first party during the value claiming phase.

Careful what you brainstorm

It is best, therefore, to separate brainstorming from evaluation/commitment. This should benefit value creation as it frees the parties to discuss ideas without having to justify them at every turn, thus avoiding interruptions in the creative process. This advice can be broken down into three different negotiation moves that can make brainstorming valuable to negotiations.

1) Do brainstorm, but do it first, during your preparation – Brainstorming in front of your counterparty is to completely lower your defenses. A **value negotiator**, positive, but not naïve, should also consider the risk that the counterparty will not lower their defences equally and instead will see this as an opportunity to improve their value claiming position instead of fully engaging in value creation.

Invite a colleague or two if you can, and go as wild and as far as you can, since you will be in a safe environment and thus can come up with any idea, no matter how borderline or past the border it may sound. Once that exercise is done, you can then go back to your list and prepare for the brainstorming during the negotiation with pre-thought ideas to further stimulate the process. During your preparation, you will also realise which ideas reveal too much and are thus inappropriate to the negotiation. It may be possible to tweak some of them so that they expand the scope of options without revealing disadvantageous information.

2) Brainstorm structural options, not numbers – Frame the brainstorming exercise as an exchange of ideas or options just for the sake of exploring

possibilities, since you may not even be able to commit to some of the options you share. Make sure that this understanding and “rule” are clear to the counterparty. The evaluation or commitment should be set aside for later. Keep brainstorming to the structure or the framework of the agreement (structural options), but avoid brainstorming numbers (specific options) since these are the ones that reveal the extent of your limits and resources.

3) Avoid early judgment or commitment of any kind – For a brainstorming or any similar option generation process to work, it is helpful to not have every idea being scrutinised and torn apart before you move to the next one. The demotivation and internalisation of the evaluation alone will kill the process. Besides, going from creation to evaluation and then to creation again is a difficult mental and emotional transition to make, especially if it is done repeatedly.

As a result, the parties will probably find the process too cumbersome and revolve around a couple of options, avoiding the back-and-forth. Even if the judgment or evaluation is positive, it will lead the counterparty to perceive that this is something the counterparty accepts and thus be understood as a commitment. This is also quite dangerous, because it pushes the parties to commit to options or issues in isolation, forgetting that an option is only good if it fits the other options in a package or system that ultimately makes sense and brings value to you.

So if someone puts an option on the table and to some extent demands a response, it may be wise to say: “I will be glad to share my opinion on it once I see the full picture and all the other possible options side by side. Why don’t we continue with our process and see what else we can come up with?” If they insist and you feel like giving some positive indication, it would be best to commit tentatively: “This seems like a good idea for now but I can only tell you if it works or not when I see how it will interact with the other options. Since we do not know what else is there, let’s park this one for now and continue our conversation.”

Brainstorming in a negotiation is useful, but it must be done with care. Instead of brainstorming, it could be thought of as brain irrigation, letting both sides get their feet wet in the value creation process without being fully soaked by the time it comes to the value claiming stage.

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