

Brainstorming is not stress-proof

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Brainstorming sessions are meant to be the offer you can't refuse. They combine the appeal of a fighting challenge with a suggestion of trendy methodology. And in a year like this, you're likely to be seeing a lot of this hurry-hurry problem-solving technique, with its group-games and licence to 'think the unthinkable'.

The theory behind brainstorming is that all manner of creative solutions are hovering just out of sight, at the edge of the conscious mind. By taking a little holiday from your regular routines, you may stimulate dormant areas of the brain, and view intractable problems with a fresh slant.

This may sound as though it is helping to relieve stress, especially as it's meant to take place in a non-judgmental environment - the one day when you can say anything you like without fear of penalty.

Yet, I can detect stressor-elements behind the bravado. One of them is the pressure to generate ideas quickly, on the principle that 'quantity is quality' - ie one person's vague thought may be adapted by someone else into a usable idea.

This pressure could weigh heavily on the shy or the inexperienced. Another is the underlying feeling that all of this is remedial - it suggests that the current system has somehow failed. (In practice, it usually signals an error in the brief.)

Generally it's a mistake to treat creative work as a piece of theatre. In the creative trades, the crafting of solutions is basically a practised routine - simply supplying goods to order, like any other. I knew one of London's top TV comedy writers, and sometimes caught sight of him at work. You never saw anyone looking less amused.

He reminded me of an electrician trying to trace a short-circuit. Also to my surprise, I found that he worked strictly nine-to-five, and did not see why he should take work home. But one evening, he decided to do just that.

An immensely popular female star on his show had announced her retirement, and the production team were thrown into chaos. The 'storyline conferences' (which he hated anyway) had now become a sort of all-day brainstorm, with wild ideas being passed round the table, none of them usable.

The prevailing sense of panic was impossible to miss, and he decided that he might as well go home and solve the problem alone.

He knew it would mean bold, radical re-thinking. But he simply faced up to this in a calm atmosphere, and steadily worked out how to fill the gap left by the great comedienne.

Next morning, he was able to present the team with his new model for the series, and a sketch-plan of the next five episodes. The show survived.

Key points: Creativity

- Brainstorming has a superficial appeal as a creative technique
- The air of informal game-playing can look like stress relief
- The pressure to generate ideas in quantity raises tension-levels

- The writer is a BBC broadcaster and motivational speaker, with 20 years experience as CEO of Carole Spiers Group, an international stress consultancy based in London.