



HOW-TO-GUIDE TO INNOVATION: IDEATION FOR IMPACT

By Gerard Harkin, Director of 3inno

This article is the second in a three part series looking at ways to improve the success rate of idea generation sessions.

In Part 1, we defined the term 'ideation' as the creative process of generating and developing new ideas; this differs from brainstorming in that an ideation predictably generates ideas that can make a real business impact whilst engaging participants in a positive way.

In Part 1, we also identified four actions to help prepare for an ideation:

1. Be clear on the aims and deliverables of the ideation session
2. Identify and recruit the right participants
3. Plan the workshop process
4. Select the right tools and prepare good stimulus

However, even having agreed the objectives, designed the process, specified the tools, prepared the stimulus, and handpicked and briefed all the participants, it is still possible for the workshop to go slightly 'off course', and in rather unexpected ways. There could be any number of reasons for this, but **some of the more unpredictable factors that can affect an ideation outcome include:**

- » The dynamics of time, tiredness and engagement, which can introduce erratic elements into the ideation
- » Communication issues, which can and do arise, such as body language being misinterpreted
- » 'The map is not the territory' is especially true when it comes to an ideation, as the 'live' creative experience does, and should, differ from the detailed plan

- » Facilitation is not a guaranteed right; it needs to be earned - the group must give the leader the right to facilitate them. To illustrate this point, consider a police officer facilitating traffic at a busy junction. We follow their instructions because they have earned the right to facilitate. But we'd have a different reaction to a plain clothed civilian waving their arms in traffic. In other words, even though you walk into the room thinking you're the facilitator, it's not a done deal!

In light of these unpredictable elements, which can arise at any time and in any ideation session, a key challenge facing ideation facilitators is: 'How to predictably generate ideas that can have a real business impact when some of the factors that shape the success of an ideation are outside the facilitator's direct control?'

Ideations can be costly if you factor in the preparation, participants' time, and venue costs. However, potentially the most significant cost, and the most difficult to measure, is the cost of failure – i.e. not generating the right quality and volume of ideas. This kind of failure can delay an innovation programme, impact morale, allow competitors to get one step ahead, and channel investment towards the development of weak ideas.

Given the potential for unpredictability and the consequences of failure, ideation success often turns on the facilitator's skill in identifying ideation killers as and when they arise, and making 'in-flight adjustments' that ensure a high volume of good ideas are generated.

Ideation killers

There are a number of potential ideation killers that can make or break an ideation initiative. Below are some of the most common culprits:



1. **Flagging energy levels.** Ideation sessions can be mentally draining, especially when the session lasts a full day. Keeping participants' energy levels steady improves the flow and freshness of ideas and fosters collaboration by ensuring everyone remains involved and engaged.
2. **Participants don't grasp the creative techniques.** Applying creative techniques can require a real mental shift for some participants, particularly in more risk-averse company cultures. Ensuring that everyone understands, and is comfortable using, the techniques that are planned for the session is essential.
3. **Participants reject and assess ideas instead of generating and building on them.** Good ideation requires an open and collaborative atmosphere. Otherwise, participants will shut off, suggestions and thoughts will stop flowing, and the potential for fresh and disruptive ideas will drastically reduce.
4. **Rigid facilitation.** Sometimes, facilitators can stick too rigidly to the agenda, particularly if the ideation starts to take a step off the facilitator's ideation plan, or if the session falls behind the time schedule. A good facilitator will need to flex the agenda if there is a flow of ideas or if the planned approach isn't working.
5. **Risk aversion.** Risk aversion is rooted deep in the psychologies of many people and is common in many corporate cultures. However, good ideation requires participants to be open to different perspectives and possibilities. Overly vocal risk aversion can disrupt the ideation environment, causing other participants to withdraw.
6. **Disruptive behaviour.** This needs little explanation – disruptive participants could stop an ideation session dead in its tracks. The impact of, and solutions to, this kind of situation will depend on what lies behind the disruptive behaviour.

Overleaf, we set out a number of in-flight adjustments to address these ideation killers. These tactics will help optimise your ideation results and your return on investment. The advice is arranged in the form of a list of practical tips that you can quickly work through to improve the quality of your sessions.

IN-FLIGHT ADJUSTMENTS TO MANAGE POTENTIAL IDEATION KILLERS

1

ENERGY

Flagging energy levels

Take a break and recommend participants get some fresh air

Get people moving - do some energising exercises and get participants out of their seats

Have a few climate setters and mental break exercises up your sleeve

Provide good refreshments, especially in the afternoon of a full-day session – a surprise box of chocolates usually does the trick!

2

TECHNIQUE

Participants don't grasp the creative techniques

Demonstrate the tools first with simple warm-up exercises to show how the techniques work in practice - illustrate with real examples of how companies have used the tools and the results that were achieved

Explain the tools in simple language and allow people to ask for clarification

3

RULES

Participants reject and assess ideas instead of generating and building on them

Have clear ground rules that include listening, collaboration and respect, and refer back to them if necessary

Illustrate the difference between positive behaviours, such as building and clarification, and destructive behaviour such as rejection and judgment – some participants may not realise how negative their behaviour is until this is highlighted

Reassure participants that there is plenty of opportunity for idea assessment at a later stage in the idea development process

Bring a soft object such as a cuddly toy that the team can throw in the direction of the culprit. It's a great way for them to self-facilitate away from the undesired behaviour, but in a fun way.

Make sure the participants address the whole audience instead of only the facilitator or specific individuals

4

FACILITATION

Rigid facilitation

Go with the flow if a particular technique is working. The goal is generating a volume of quality ideas, not applying a certain number of techniques.

Slow down and have some back pocket techniques to change tack if the circumstances require it. For example, if participants have had a very late night at the bar the night before, most are likely to show up without much energy. In this situation it is likely to be impossible to deliver the desired results by working them too hard, so apply the old adage of 'less is more,' slow down the pace and trying something like setting up intergroup competitions. It's best to aim for a decent result that engages the participants than to end up with no result by sticking to an agenda that won't work.

5

RISK

Risk aversion

Make it OK to take risks in a safe and fun way through the use of creative tools, energisers and climate setters

Use real life examples of how risk-taking positively affects the types of ideas generated, as well as the workshop atmosphere

Explain your innovation process. Good processes build in risk assessment at the appropriate stage. The ideation stage is about exploring possibilities; assessing risks reduces the likelihood that you will generate valuable disruptive and differentiated ideas.

6

BEHAVIOUR

Disruptive behaviour

Diagnose the root cause(s) of the behaviour:

- » Environmental factors, e.g. the room is too hot, coffee is cold, there is not enough light
- » The facilitator is using complex language or hasn't explained the tools properly
- » Do participant(s) feel others aren't listening or that they are being ignored? If so, encourage the use of paraphrasing and crediting. Crediting is simply acknowledging the part of other people's ideas that played in your own thinking, for example, by saying something like – "Your idea made me think ..."
- » Preoccupation with business as usual work commitments, for example, a manager is spending all their time texting and emailing

On the rare occasion that someone's behaviour is truly getting in the way of you achieving results, add a short break and discuss the appropriate solution with the ideation Sponsor.

ADDITIONAL ADVICE

In addition to the 'in-flight adjustments' outlined above, here are a final few words of advice for ideation practitioners to ensure smoother sailing on the day.

- ☑ **Check for bias.** Do your homework ahead of time. Identify any pre-reaction to certain people, issues, and topics. This will enable you to leave personal issues, positive or negative, to one side before the workshop and reduce any tendencies to judge and assess a participant's ideas.
- ☑ **Get comfortable with the physical environment.** Get to the room beforehand to familiarise yourself with the space and plan your movements around the room, i.e. where to hang flip charts, place stimulus, the best areas for group work, etc. Managing the paper and flip charts might seem like a trivial task, but if done unprofessionally, you could lose the group's attention and confidence.
- ☑ **Engage the room fully upon entering.** Make eye contact with all participants and convey the sense that the

workshop is all about creativity and co-creation - not a standard, run-of-the-mill meeting.

- ☑ **Keep it simple.** Bear in mind that words are a mine-field. If you confuse participants at the start of an ideation, you could lose the right to facilitate them. It can be very difficult to reclaim this right.
- ☑ **Follow your intuition.** Trust your gut feeling to make in-flight adjustments. It might help you identify the presence of risk aversion, confusion, and frustration before they fully manifest in the workshop.

Hopefully, the above facilitative interventions will help you improve the success rate of your ideations.

In Part 3, we will look at the key steps that need to be completed immediately after the workshop in order to ensure the session generates real impact.