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Just breathe

Book Chapter

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Just breathe

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Strapline: Breathe in and out for creative Nirvana

Serve to: large teams from 6 onwards

Number of servings:

Cost/resource: low

Background

Applying divergent and convergent thinking to large teams can offer rich interactions and inspire creative thinking (Osborn, 1953; Guilford, 1967). Divergent thinking, here, is the process of generating multiple, different and original ideas to a problem. Convergent thinking is then used to apply an order to the ideas generated to converge on a few, or one.

I have used the breathe metaphor in creative sessions as a useful way of communicating this process. 'Breathing in' means diverging. Imagine taking a deep breath: you take in different ideas and everything around you. Now breathe out: and you are left with a few valuable ideas, discarding the remains back into nirvana.

Good breathing helps to avoid groupthink (Janis, 1971), which characterises a group that reaches consensus without thinking of alternatives.

Ingredients

- Sticky notes, flipcharts and pens, whiteboards
- Some secluded places for small groups
- A large room with wall space for posting and ordering ideas

Method

1. Post a problem statement to a large group of diverse people.
2. Breathe in (diverge)
 - a. Discuss the problem in large group for a few minutes (max 10min). This starts the divergent phase that generates multiple different ideas. Try to consider any relevant issues around the problem (see "*How might we*" *space* for some ideas on how to do this).
 - b. Split into smaller sub-groups to continue the breathing in process for 30 min. This time, discuss some of the ideas in more detail, again, exploring as many issues as come out of the process as possible. At some point in this step the converging or breathing out will naturally begin.
3. Breathe out (converge)
 - a. Come back together into the large group and present all the ideas while pinning the gist of the idea with some detail on a post it note to the wall. Others can make note of similar ideas during the presentation.
 - b. Discuss overlapping and outstanding ideas. End the convergence by trying to identify patterns in the ideas generated.
4. Now consider whether the original problem statement is still the right problem.
5. This should lead to another round of breathing in which the subgroups take a converged idea and generate more ideas or alternative details. Use a sequence of divergence and convergence to work through the issues of any problem.

6. Don't diverge or converge too far – but make sure you go far enough. Somewhere in between these extremes lies the *Sweet spot*. On either side of this will be questions such as 'why didn't you consider...', so at the very least, you will be exposing yourself to these sooner rather than later.

Notes on ingredients

For a good primer on this, see Cougar (1994), the Creative Education Foundation (2013) and the IDEO toolkit for educators (Riverdale and IDEO, 2011). Remember that this is as much an acclimatisation activity as it is problem solving one – considering a topic is as much about exploring the context as it is the problem itself.

Cook's tips

In very large teams breathing can be difficult, especially if the team is very diverse and not familiar with another. In the divergent phase, some people in the group might speak up while others remain silent. Experiment with the sub-group arrangement to get a balanced team that allows inclusive team contributions to emerge.

Warnings

In the divergent phase, the details behind some ideas might get lost in a more superficial discussion and the team missed out on an informed process of ordering ideas.