

TIPS FOR CONDUCTING BRAINSTORMING EXERCISES

The idea behind brainstorming for the purpose of contingency planning is to quickly list as many threat or hazard scenarios as you can think of that could lead to a disaster of such a scale that humanitarian assistance would be warranted. The exercise is done with a group. The brainstorming process is open and unrestrictive and should support the idea that everyone in the group can contribute openly without being judged on the value of his or her answer. The following four simple rules should be followed:

1. Any idea is allowed – without judgment

The point of this rule is to hear everyone and encourage as many ideas as possible. In many cases the idea of a less-experienced colleague or an idea that at first seems foolish later proves to be the best idea of all. Don't worry about prioritizing the ideas at this point— that will be done later. Another way of describing the goal is to maximize "quantity" of ideas, not "quality" of ideas, at least at this point in the process.

2. Encourage participation

Some people are naturally shy or simply do not like the brainstorming process; however, they may hold valuable information needed by your group. Someone in the group should take the opportunity to actively encourage each member to contribute to the process.

3. Watch the clock

Some time pressure actually helps in a brainstorming session. You must finish within the time set. Begin immediately—don't lose time discussing the merits of ideas, just start listing them.

4. Record your ideas

All your good ideas are wasted if they are not recorded methodically and legibly. Use flip charts, whiteboards, post-it notes, or whatever you can to quickly (but legibly) record your group's ideas. A large map or other graphic technique to relate hazards to different areas of the country may be very useful.

Brainstorming is a technique in which a group generates several ideas without concern for criticism or negative feedback. In the first stage of the process, all ideas are written down without any restrictions. The uninhibited flow of ideas helps to generate creative scenarios. In the second stage of the process, the scenarios are refined and selected through group discussion. Brainstorming is appropriate where there is great uncertainty about future events. Careful leadership is required in brainstorming sessions to keep the group focused on creative scenario building rather than being critical about ideas generated. It is difficult to use brainstorming effectively in groups of more than six or seven people.

While brainstorming helps promote creative ideas, a more structured approach is sometimes required. The **nominal group technique** focuses on individual generation of ideas. In this technique each participant has time to write down his or her ideas about the likely scenario. Each person then describes these ideas to the plenary. The advantage of this approach is that the ideas are written down before the group interchange and therefore are not influenced by 'group think.' The nominal group approach is probably the best method of generating quality scenarios. It can be used effectively in larger groups than brainstorming, but is better if limited to 10 or 15 people. The quality of the input will be improved if participants are informed beforehand that they will be asked to contribute scenarios.

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