

The art of questionstorming

Most of us are already familiar with brainstorming, a technique for generating new ideas as rapidly as possible, without stopping to judge or discuss them. The theory behind brainstorming is that genuinely creative ideas often look silly or useless at first, so we need tools that help us suspend disbelief and keep us focused on generating fresh ideas, one after another.

In our own work here at Vervago, we do lots of old-fashioned brainstorming. But we also use the theory behind brainstorming in a slightly different way: coming up with lists of questions whenever our process of analysis is stuck. We call this questionstorming. Questionstorming is similar to brainstorming in that we produce our questions one after another, initially without discussion or judgment. Questionstorming differs from brainstorming in its focus on *questions*, not *ideas*. Brainstorming puts new ideas on the table. Questionstorming helps us find new pathways for probing and vetting those ideas.

Here are some common situations where questionstorming can be helpful.

1. **Your group is stuck on a problem that seems like it shouldn't be so hard.** When we're working on a problem, sometimes we find ourselves asking: "Why is this so much more difficult than we expected?" That's a sure sign that our thinking needs to go deeper—especially our thinking about assumptions. This is a good time to bring the team together (or just sit down by yourself) and questionstorm assumptions. Make sure everyone brings along their PQ toolkit!
2. **You are seriously confused about a technical topic.** As knowledge workers, we often come across topics that we only vaguely understand. Sometimes that's sufficient, but often it's not. When you find yourself thinking, "I'm totally lost," it's time for questionstorming. On a fresh sheet of paper or in a new document, start generating as many questions as you can, focusing on what's most confusing. Don't judge any of the questions as "stupid"—just keep listing them! Most of your questions will involve clarification, but not all. Notice how putting your questions into words helps focus your studying and puts you in control of your learning process.
3. **Something has gone wrong and it's not clear why.** Maybe you have just lost a key client, or perhaps the team has missed a crucial milestone. If you are having trouble understanding why things went wrong, it's time for a questionstorming session with the group. Looking back at the situation, what are all the questions you want to ask now—even if you weren't asking them at the time? After your questionstorming, you may want to rank the questions according to their usefulness for personal learning and for the team or organization's learning. And figure out which ones still need answers! Studying unasked questions is one of the best ways to turn failures into lessons.

Questionstorming doesn't replace Four Columns, the tool you learned in the PQ+A workshop for doing a final determination about the validity of a recommendation. When our thinking is stuck, a questionstorming session can be perfect for breaking the logjam. However, when it's time to evaluate something deeply and systematically, layer after layer, Four Columns is always the best tool for the job.

Exercise

Look for an opportunity to do a Questionstorming session this week, either on your own or with your team.

Do you have comments about this Skill Sharpener? Do you have your own stories to tell or questions to ask? Contact QuestionMaster@vervago.com.