Best practices for facilitating a group brainstorming session with mind mapping software

By Chuck Frey, The Mind Mapping Software Blog

One of the opportunities you may be faced with as a mind mapper is to serve as the facilitator or idea recorder for small group brainstorming sessions in your organization. This is an awesome opportunity to take make an important contribution to your organization’s success, by helping your team to think more broadly, clearly and creatively. It’s also an awesome responsibility; you must accurately record the ideas and insights the group generates, without attempting to color, shade or direct them in the ways you want.

You need to catalyze the group’s thinking, and then get out of the way and let them create. As Brandy Agerbeck explains it in her new book, *The Graphic Facilitator's Guide: How to use your listening, thinking and drawing skills to make meaning*, the facilitator needs to be focused on process – aiding them through the idea generation and evaluation processes, and then recording next actions for which each member of the group will be responsible – while the group is focused on generating ideas and content.

In this report, we’ll take a closer look at the qualities of an effective graphic facilitator, someone who stands at the front of the room and records the group’s ideas using text and simple images – and then look at the similarities and differences between graphic facilitation and mind mapping a group’s creative output.
I’m convinced that Brandy’s list of the qualities of an effective graphic facilitator have a lot in common with mind mapping a group’s output. There is much we can learn from her observations of key success factors. So let’s dig into them to see what we can learn!

Qualities of an effective graphic facilitator

(Brandy’s principles are highlighted in bold. My comments follow in plain text.)

You have a black belt in listening. You listen deeply to what people are saying, and capture it with accuracy. You can distinguish between the idea itself and background information or opinions. You don’t need to record the latter two types of information in your mind map.

The ability to discern the ideas, to separate the wheat from the chaff, if you will, is an essential skill.

Agerbeck points out that many people tend to become overly enamored with the drawing aspect of graphic facilitation. The pictures become the “rock star” of this practice, attracting the lion’s share of attention. In reality, listening is much more important; she calls it “the silent hero” of graphic facilitation.

Good listening skills are the foundation of effective group facilitation. If you’re not a good listener, it won’t matter how good you are at drawing or capturing ideas in a drawing or a mind map. If any members of the group feel you aren’t listening to them or that you’re not capturing their ideas accurately, they will immediately disengage from the session and you may never get them to mentally “return” to it.

When you’re talking to someone, you often stop and summarize: “So, what I hear you saying is…” The person agrees with your summary. This skill of distilling what people are telling you into a well-articulated, clear idea is essential for a brainstorming facilitator. When
people are sharing their ideas, their thoughts are rarely well organized. They may speak in fragments and jump around a lot. You need to be able to listen, connect the dots and then feed the idea back to the person who spoke it in a more cohesive form, so they can reflect upon what they said and how you interpreted it. If you don’t take this step, you may inadvertently record something different than what the person intended. Once again, if they think you just don’t “get it,” they will disengage from the session and the group will no longer benefit from their input.

You put your own needs aside to serve the group as a whole. Your job is not to shape the group around your agenda; it is to serve as a conduit. As Agerbeck explains, you need to serve as a meaning maker. “Graphic facilitation is a powerful tool to help people feel heard, to develop a shared understanding as a group and be able to see and touch their work in a way they couldn’t access before,” she says.

You have design experience and understand composition and how to use placement. “You know how to use color, line and scale to make your charts visually organized and appealing. You use your thinking skills to organize the information and find patterns and make connections.” Few of us have gone to design school, but we can become students of these subjects through programs like the Mind Mapping Insider, by viewing well-designed mind maps and by creating and optimizing your own mind maps.

You can listen objectively with “outsider ears” even if you have a personal investment in the conversation. Again, you don’t try to color or shade what people are discussing as they share, build upon and critique each other’s ideas. You need to be able to mentally “step back” and look upon their ideas dispassionately, as if you’ve never met the group before and have no idea of what their history is or how they tend to think. This is harder to do than it sounds, especially if you’re a part of the team and tend to get wrapped up emotionally in its dynamics.

You want to serve others. By providing the service of being the group’s facilitator and idea recorder, you are providing tremendous value to them. You need to have an unselfish attitude, a mindset of service in order to help the group do their best work.

You are good at making connections between things. Whether you are drawing the group’s ideas on a large white board or recording them in a mind map, you need to be able to see patterns, and group ideas and concepts in ways that are the most meaningful to the group whom you’re serving. This is part of sense making. You need to cultivate the ability to step back on a regular basis and consider what’s on the screen. As more ideas are recorded, patterns will start to emerge. You’ll want to create new first-level topics that capture the essence of a group
of ideas’ commonality, and then move those ideas to become child topics of that conceptual container.

Mind maps are all about displaying relationships between individual ideas and chunks of information and knowledge. Use this to your advantage to help the group structure their creative output. Ask for input from group members, using questions such as, “What do these three ideas have in common?” and “Look at these ideas here – do you see a pattern emerging?” Don’t be afraid to play “What if?” with the ideas you’ve captured. This is a collaborative, emergent process. Be open to adapting the map’s structure based on the group’s input throughout the process.

One other tip: If the group generates ideas that don’t seem to “fit” but you don’t want to lose them, you may want to consider creating a floating topic called “for further consideration” or something similar to serve as a “parking lot” for them. This enables you to return to these ideas later in the meeting and ask the group what they want to do with them.

**You tend to see the big picture.** You can step back from individual branches and ideas and look at the ideas the group has generated from a higher level, in a gestalt fashion. This principle can also refer to seeing the bigger-picture issues that are affecting the business, and bringing them into the conversation at appropriate times. While the group is getting into the thick of discussing the nature of the problem and specific ideas to solve it, your job as the facilitator is to maintain a higher-level focus, helping the group to think about their ideas from a larger perspective.

**You see how pieces fit together into a whole.** This gets back to the whole concept of pattern recognition. You have the ability to look at a set of disparate ideas and see how they may fit together. Remember, there are two steps to brainstorming: The first is divergence – generating a large number of diverse ideas, some of which may initially seem to be far afield of the problem
that the group is trying to solve. Think broadly and laterally. Don’t censor any ideas at this stage of the brainstorming process.

The second phase is convergence. After generating a large number of diverse ideas, your job is to help the group to combine and distill all of these ideas into a smaller number of high-potential ones for further consideration and action. This is where the skill of seeing how the pieces fit together into a larger whole can be invaluable.

**You enjoy thinking about how ideas are organized.** If you don’t enjoy thinking about and manipulating ideas, you shouldn’t be facilitating a brainstorming session. If you’re going to be an effective catalyst, you need to be passionate about ideas and how they fit together.

**You are able to multitask. The idea of listening, organizing and drawing at the same time doesn’t short-circuit your brain.** When a group is on fire creatively, the ideas will be flying fast and furious. The last thing you want to do is slow the group down and kill their creative “flow.” So you need to be able to listen and quickly add the essence of each idea to your map, and then do some rudimentary organization of the group’s output as time permits.

**You are good at reading group dynamics.** This is a special skill. You need to be able to sense the mood in the room, and how it changes over time. You also need to be keenly aware of the interpersonal chemistry between members of the team. Don’t let one person dominate the brainstorming session, interrupt others or criticize their ideas. These are just a few of the personality factors that can kill a group’s creative output. The ability to read and respond to evolving group dynamics is essential to keeping maintaining the team’s creative energy, and to keeping everyone engaged in the brainstorming process.

**You are good at inferring things and figuring things out in context.** One of the key things you can help group members to do is see the “white spaces” – the missing aspects of the problem or challenge they need to add to the map in order to create a complete, accurate picture of it. The “white spaces” tend to be excellent sources of new ideas. To discern inferences, ask “What could this mean?”
What makes mind mapping facilitation different

While the principles of facilitation are very similar, the act of recording ideas in a mind map versus drawing them on butcher block paper, a flip chart or a whiteboard is significantly different. Here are some of the differences:

- Hand-drawn ideas can have more of a non-linear flow to them. In other words, there is no “center” to what you’re recording. In contrast, a mind map has a central topic, with all of the topics and ideas radiating outward from it.

- Keeping up with the flow of ideas may be a bit more challenging, because you need to use a combination of the keyboard and mouse to record ideas and keep them organized. Some mind mapping programs offer a brainstorming mode where you can enter a succession of ideas using only the keyboard. That helps a lot. Ideally, you may want to have two people leading the brainstorming session: One would be focused on facilitation, while the other does only recording.

- Some members of the group may not feel as comfortable having their ideas recorded in a mind map. It isn’t as easy to understand at first compared to a drawing or a diagram on the board. You should probably preface the brainstorming session with a brief explanation of how mind mapping works.

- Once a drawing is placed on the writing surface, it is “anchored” there forever. It cannot be moved or deleted. You can annotate it, however. In contrast, recording the group’s ideas in a software-generated mind map gives you the freedom to group related ideas together, insert links, notes and markers to designate priority, and assign them to people.

- As a “living document,” the session mind map can evolve into a project management tool or can be exported into a dedicated project management tool such as P3 or Microsoft Project; this isn’t possible with ideas recorded by hand.

- At the conclusion of a brainstorming session, you can immediately share the mind map with the members of the group, including any task assignments and next steps. You can also do this in a sense with ideas that have been recorded using flip charts, a whiteboard or butcher block paper. The typical way to do this is to photograph everything, and then share it with the group. But it’s hard to show an overview of the entire idea set, from my experience, because everything in the image is usually too small to read and lighting is
usually flat in meeting rooms, making it hard to get a decent exposure and ensure that all marker colors are easily legible in the images.

**Questions?**

Please contact Chuck Frey at chuck@innovationtools.com.

Please visit the Mind Mapping Software Blog for all of the latest news, trends and resources related to visual mapping.

You can also follow Chuck Frey on Twitter for even more insights and ideas.