Using "iLab™" to manage hundreds and thousands of ideas in a Mass Ideation Process?

By Michael S.J. Butterworth

Some of us when reading this title article would have jumped straight to the statement that "is this not about mass brainstorming?" Why is the word "mass ideation" used? Simply this. When the father of brainstorming Alex Osborn (1938), starting this "buzz" of brainstorming, he defined it as a 3-step process of fact-finding, idea-finding and solution-finding. These three steps constitute the actual definition. Hence, if we gather a group of people together to brainstorm for ideas, what we are technically doing is we are 'mass ideating" which does not necessary mean we will walk into the third process of "solution-finding". However, idea-finding, whether it is a small sum or larges quantities cannot move unless the fact-finding is completed. We call this fact-finding process, the "Area of Concern" (if it pertains to looking for ideas and solutions to solve an existing problem), or "Area of Interest" (if it pertains to everything is working well but we need to find a better way of doing things better, in other words, looking for new opportunities. There can only be two reasons why we need to mass ideate. OK, presumably we have gotten our AOC or AOC and we get a group of people together to mass ideate, what do we do when we finish our ideation process? A classic example was when SolutionPeople, (www.solutionpeople.com) headed by Gerald Haman was invited to Singapore to do a mass brainstorming which he called "Thinkathon™", a record of 454,000 ideas came from an audience of 8,000. As I was one of the 250 facilitators helping to count the ideas after the 60 minute brainstorm to rush to results out (within 15 minutes) to the audience, I was invariably haunted by the results of these half million ideas. Sadly, to my discovery, two years later, the organizer of this event did not bring any of these ideas to the third stage of "solution-finding", short of even filtering the ideas. Here was the gap.

With the help of a client, I reinvented the mass ideation process and introduced a 4-step structured process, and included a filtering process which was then only a philosophy by Dr. Dale Hunter called "Co-Operacy". It was successfully tested and proven that using the structured 4-step approach, it actually exhausted all avenues of creative thinking techniques used to induce ideas from the crowd, and the audience themselves took accountability in using the "Co-Operacy" method, which was "consensus decision-making", managed to filtered all the quantitative ideas into clusters or themes of qualitative ideas without adulteration or premature eradication of any creative ideas brainstormed by the audience. In fact, Proctor Tony (1995) tells us that brainstorming is simply a creative meeting at which a list of ideas is produced for subsequent evaluation and processing as solutions to problems.

Furthermore, Proctor (1995) insists that in a brainstorming, all ideas are accepted and none should be rejected which warrants the necessity to sift all ideas before we filter it for final evaluation considering that no ideas should be "killed" during the process. This actual process today provided a structured approach to mass ideation which can be done by any size of audience. Previously, Alex Osborn (1938) recommend a group size of eight to 12, Michael Stevens (1998) recommended varying groups from five to 20, Jason R. Rich (2003) recommends a comfortable group size of between two to 10 as according to Rich, too many people only caused tracking of ideas and interaction between group member difficult and confusing. This theory is now proved wrong as with Gerald Haman, who had a crowd of 8,000 and with any size. It is not the size but a matter of organizing the session and systematically processing the ideas that difficulty and confusing can be overcome. This new process, which I term as "iLab™" (ideation Laboratory) has been successfully proven to be successful in tracking down all the ideas and themed at the end of the mass ideation process. In fact, the process was put to the test at a recent "7th International Conference for Facilitators held in Singapore, August 2004, using the AOI of "How can we make the next Conference for excising and interesting" got the audience so hyped and so much ideas were generated and themed that it proven the "iLab™" process was now a new tool that corporate leaders can use to generate mass ideation to jumpstart Innovation Initiative. In fact, the criteria for any successful brainstorming as pronounced by Ed Bernacki (2002) falls into one of the two steps; if the quantity of ideas being generated is not high, or the quality of ideas is not perceived to be high. In "iLab™" we allow for "quantity to first prevail", and subsequently "quality of ideas will avail". James Webb Young (1940) in his book on "technique for Producing Ideas" concluded that *"quality of ideas you get cannot be guaranteed"*. Reaffirmed by Tony Proctor in his book "The Essence of Management Creativity" (1995), he reiterates that, *"Brainstorming can be carried out by individuals or by groups. It is based on the hypothesis that a large number of ideas will include at least a few good ones. However, this has not yet been proved conclusively"*. With "iLab™" this hypothesis is now proved that "it is possible" to retain the quantity and sift the quality by using the "co-operacy" technique where consensus decision making allows all ideas to take a place in clusters of themes of ideas which can then provide the lead for some of the most promising themes of ideas. It is simply using the famous oyster catch analogy by George Gamez (1996) where if one is going to just dive and pick one oyster up at one dive, there will be countless dive and exhaustion. Instead, bring up a bunch of oysters with each dive would gather more oysters in less time, less effort, and increase chances of success. This analogy promotes *"quantity leading to quality"*.

This brings us to the next stage of knowing what we should do with the themes of ideas "perceived to be qualitative" that resulted from the mass oyster catch? This very conveniently helps us to fulfill the final third process of Alex Osborn's solution-finding, where the themes of ideas go through an evaluation process for project

undertaking. Why this process is critical simply is that from a resource perspective, no organization can innovate in all the technology areas of markets they would like to and with his constraint, choosing which idea or project to implement is a major decision for most organizations (Tim Jones, 2002, Project selection 3.4 pp 40).

Let me just share very briefly how the 4 –step structured mass ideation works.

Step 1: "Think-in-the-Box™" – With the AOC or AOI in hand, participants first go through a process of silent thinking tapping on their ability to solve problems on what past experience and knowledge they may have. Both Rogers (1954) and Kelly (1955) share the same thinking that given one's own understanding of the subject matter, that is, knowing your own knowledge and experience in the field of interest, one can develop a more creative insight for brainstorming of ideas

Step 2: "Think-outside-the-Box™" – When the first step is done, the "perceived creative thinkers" would have thought of, in their own knowledge and experience (perspective), what they feel could be some "best ideas" (to them at that moment in time). Now, the next step is to openly share one's "perceived best ideas" with others to brainstorm on more "*newer*" ideas. Perceived best ideas to some may not be perceived as best ideas to others. This step allows for interactive sharing to build on ideas from "old ideas" that were generated in step one (some ideas in step 1 could be "creative" which no one has thought about. Therefore, not all step 1 ideas are "old ideas" but in my experiments, generally, there are some common ideas based on common knowledge and experience). In the process of sharing one's perceived best ideas, newer ideas may develop and this is the stage where "newer" ideas will appear from cross-fertilization of ideas. At IDEO, teams brainstorm together are from diverse groups and they challenge each others' assumptions of what others perceived as "best ideas" to further build on newer ideas without coming too quickly with "perceived right" solutions (Creativity, Chapter 6, Michel Syrett and Jean Lammiman, 2002). This is also lateral thinking where the interaction improves both the social bonds and out of the box self-thinking which in some case, with limited knowledge and experience cannot provide further impetus to storming for creative ideas. James Harrington (1997) term this as "non-linear" creativity thinking where the individual frees itself of existing knowledge and in transcending rightness or wrongness right to explore if any other ideas could appear through interactive exploration. Proctor, Tony (1995) asserts that in any brainstorming, having ideas accepted spurs one to come up with more ideas and it constitutes what we call a social process, where left alone, without interaction, how much can we think of? Ruth McCall, founder of Cambridge Animation Systems describes business creativity as "how you work with other people, how people work in groups, how people manage change" (Michel Syrett and Jean Lammiman, 2002).

Step 3: "Think-in-and-out-of-the-Box™"- This stage requires "more provoking" techniques where after step 1 and 2, the exhaustive stage is to scrap the bottom of the pot for anything left "unmined". This technique is to use a simply acronym like "SCAMPER" which provides the stimulus for "substitute', "combine", "adapt", "magnify/minify", "put to other uses", "eliminate", "rearrange/reverse". Invariably, in all my mass ideation processes, this discovery is actually "cross-checking" with ideas that were previously created using some of this "provokers" in step 1 and 2, and if it is still not done, this step will help to flush them all out. A fellow British innovation leader, Paul Sloane can attest to this technique in his article (2004 April, www.Innovationtools.com) that "*a great way to generate original ideas is to look for weird combinations*". "*Nearly every new idea",* says Paul Sloane, *"is a synthesis of other ideas*" (www.destination-innovation.com). Alex Osborn (1938) relates this to inducing ideas through mental patterns because ideas allow us to make sense of our experience. This step is termed by Harrington as Provoked Creativity where some form of catalyst is used to generate mental movement and develop new insights and understanding. Larisa V and Kavita L. Seeratan (2003) affirm that our imagination plays a pivotal role in exploring of ideas through mental patterns.

Step 4: "Think-out-of-the-box™" – This final step is again a 'silent' mode step as thinkers now retreat to their "inner zone" to express what others may think as "crazy" but to them, "perfectly makes sense, if given a chance". This step allows us to "unleash" those phobic thoughts that "idea stoppers" are dying to shoot down. Some call this step "Crazy ideas". Very strangely, if we take a walk back memory lane, history testifies that idea breakthrough happens during this stage when the minds of the people may not necessary conform to the expert knowledge of the field of ideation. Examples are the Wright brothers who pioneered the first airplane when they are but bicycle mechanics. This wild idea has today given birth to the history of aviation. Others include a journalist who invented the parking meter, an undertaker developed the automatic telephone, a television engineer developed the long playing record, a veterinarian developed the pneumatic tire, a sculptor invested the ballpoint pen, a musician develop Kodachrome film, a painter developed Morse Code and many others (Brain Symphony, 2003, p.35, Dilip Mukerjea, Horizon Books).

Conclusion: When we are done with all the 4 step structured mass ideation, completely exhausted the inner-self, outer as in sharing and building ideas with others, provoked further and unleashing our wildest imagination, we then get the audience who are the originators of such ideas to review all the ideas they have brainstormed and start teeming the ideas in a consensus-decision making fashion. This can be done in many ways, but one fast way is to first the audience into two groups; group 1 will identify the duplicates and themes, and the second group coming in later to fine-tune, if not agreeable, to seek consensus before finally allocating the idea to any specific theme. The method called "Co-Operacy" technique has a two-fold outcome; it helps to eradicate idea duplication and clustering ideas

into themes without premature eradication or elimination of ideas generated by the conscientious 'thinkers" who had put their hearts and minds to think during the 4-step structured process.

This process of "iLab™" has brought brainstorming to a new dimension. Research has shown that we are still doing conventional "brainstorming" and with the advent and launching of "Thinkathon™" by Gerald Haman, he has brought brainstorming beyond the "Group" to "Mass" unimaginable size of mass ideation. In so far as mass ideation is concern, Business Mind Genius Powered by Ygnius is one outfit that describes the closest who what Gerald Haman professes to resemble mass brainstorming called "Group Brainstorming" – http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newCT_04.htm. In "group brainstorming" (though they have never quantified the size in any way), it emphasizes on using experience and creativity of all members of the group. The reason being that when individual members reach their limit on an idea, another member's creativity and experience can take the idea to the next stage. Therefore, "group brainstorming" tends to develop ideas in more depth than individual brainstorming. Again, group creativity in fact is a new domain which is still being study through formative literature in how teams can collaboration in innovation (Paulus Paul & Nijstad.B., 2003). But now, we the advent of "iLab™", a new and innovative structured process which have been tested and proven that it is the next level where organizations can pool all their staff members together in one sunny afternoon retreat, irrespective of rank or file or intelligences, to collectively brainstorm for ideas that can come from any level of the organization, breaking the myth that only leaders and have bright ideas where some of the best ideas can come from the front liners who confront the problems daily and is dying to express to someone what they think will work. However, sadly, along the line, they tell themselves, who is to believe that my idea can work. Now "iLab™", we have provided the solution that irrespective, ideas can surface from anywhere, and without pride or prejudice. Only when all ideas are surfaced, filtered and themed can we thank everybody and say, "I think we have all done a fabulous job" and with the limited resources we may have, we have some great themes of ideas to move on from here".

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Note: the 4-step mass ideation process is collectively trademarked as "a process" by MSJ Butterworth