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7 Simple Methods to Improve your Project Opportunity and Risk Brainstorming Sessions

The brainstorming of Opportunities and Risks for any projects is an essential process which seeks to be as complete as possible. It is thus essential to open as much as possible the results of the brainstorming process. This White Paper focuses on a few conventional and less conventional methods that can be used easily to greatly enhance the power of the brainstorming exercise.

Quick Reminder on the Objectives of the brainstorming session

The objective is to identify as many diverse Opportunities and Risks that could possibly apply to the Project. At this stage it is important not to pre-empt the associated probability or magnitude of the consequences; the brainstorming needs to happen in a context void of judgment on the matter to be the broadest possible and avoid creating self-censorship. In the same idea it is essential to brainstorm fundamental causes of risks and opportunities, and not brainstorm what could be their consequences.

> Without more effort from the project team members, using proper brainstorming approaches will greatly enhance the effectiveness of the process and the quality of the brainstorming result

General methodological approaches

1: Require a facilitator

From the methodological point of view, facilitation should be provided so as to make sure that judgment is not applied at that stage: judgment is very often involuntarily applied by people with a long experience of similar activities, which diminishes the fruitfulness of such sessions. It is the same observation with the issue of consequences versus cause: experienced people might express themselves by describing consequences, and facilitation might be needed to refocus the discussion on causes.

2: Brainstorm as a team

It is important to take the time to brainstorm Opportunities and Risks as a team, during a workshop. Doing this exercise in a diverse group will generate better, broader, more encompassing ideas and will allow to really think out of the box. It is a mistake in a lot of organizations to let the Risk Engineer go around the Project management team members one by one to collect their ideas. Doing identification that way will generate far less ideas and will impede the development of a common understanding about Opportunities and Risks.

3: Brainstorm Opportunities before Risks

Our mind is made in such a way that we are much better at identifying risks; however when we do that we tend to develop a sombre view of the situation and it becomes very difficult to think positively about Opportunities. Brainstorming Opportunities before Risks allows producing a much more balanced picture.

Two key methods that greatly enhance the effectiveness of the brainstorming session

4: Use Post-Its

The best brainstorming methods involve three steps. First, get all the team members to brainstorm independently of each other, without communicating. This ensures the maximum diversity of ideas. Second, get the team together in front of everyone's ideas; at that stage, all the independent ideas can be grouped by main topics. You will soon find that there are some self-evident topics that have been identified by a large number of people; and also some more 'orphan' ideas that have only been identified once or twice. As a best practice, force the team to re-brainstorm based on these 'orphan' and not so evident ideas to generate further ideas.

This cycle of individual creativity – mix with others' ideas – recycle again after having merged and confronted ideas is an accelerated version of how creativity works in real life.

As a tool, repositionable notes (also called post-its) are a great support for people noting down their ideas and then putting them up on a wall, and moving them around in logical groups.

5: The Pre-Mortem method

To help the project team brainstorm "out of the box" ideas regarding opportunities and risks, it is possible to use a specific method called the "Pre-Mortem". The principle of the method is to transpose the team virtually at the end of the project, suppose the project has failed or has widely succeeded, and consider why that would have happened.

Because we consider total success or failure of the project, participants will take a higher view; thus this method is conducive to the creation of ideas that are related to very significant Opportunities and Risks. Because of the virtual translation at the end of the project, the method also puts participants in a different setting, including considering the Project as third parties would, without the emotional attachment that sometimes gets in the way of brainstorming.

The method can also be used with stakeholders and sponsors.

The "Pre-Mortem" method is much recommended as an additional brainstorming method to complete the usual approaches to Opportunity and Risk identification.

Additional supporting processes

6: Use Lessons Learned from previous projects

Use actual Opportunity and Risk registers from previous similar Projects to generate ideas for a new Project. Well organized companies will generate over time a compilation of the most common risks for each type of Projects as part of their Lessons Learned process. Use these lists as checklists.

However, it is recommended to hold first a brainstorming session on a blank page though so as to avoid any "anchoring" effect of these lists (i.e. the conversation might get anchored by these prepared lists and new opportunities and risks might not be identified).

At the brainstorming stage, do not preempt the associated probability or magnitude of the consequences; the brainstorming needs to happen in a context void of judgment to avoid self-censorship.

7: Use general categories for project failure as prompts

Never forget usual risk categories for Projects that have been found by research to be particularly related to project failures (beyond the following general categories, they need to be made more specific to the particular context of the Project before inclusion in the Risk Register):

- Poor alignment of stakeholders and contributors to the Project purpose and objectives,
- Lack of interface management control with stakeholders,
- Lack of effective integration of the Project team,
- Lack of Change control (scope creep),
- Poor front-end preparation of the Project/ unrealistic expectations (cost, schedule),
- Unclear Project objectives,
- Specific remoteness,
- Specific new technology,
- Risks related to permitting,
- Excessive complexity (large number of poorly aligned contributors/ stakeholders with a large interdependency).

Summary

Proper effective brainstorming of Opportunities and Risks should be taken seriously. It enhances the changes to capture effectively events that could impact the project and more generally, pushes back the boundary of the Unknown-Unknowns. Without more effort from the project team members, using proper brainstorming approaches will greatly enhance the effectiveness of the process and the quality of the result. Follow the simple rules and methods exposed in this White Paper and you'll be astonished at how the effectiveness of your brainstorming sessions increases!

Find all these principles of Project Opportunity and Risk exposed in a comprehensive manner in our new Handbook,
Practical Project Risk Handbook for Project Managers
(now published, available in Paperback and Kindle versions!)
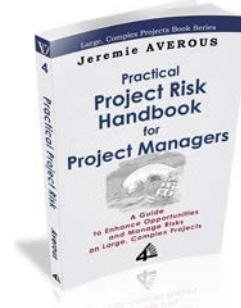
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