



# The Ten Personas of a BRAINSTORM FACILITATOR

by Mitchell Ditkoff

There are a ton of reasons why most brainstorming sessions suck, but the main reason is the brainstorm facilitator – plain and simple. Armed with a few groundrules, a flipchart marker, and the mantra that “there’s no such thing as a bad idea,” most brainstorm facilitators leave participants completely underwhelmed. The reason has less to do with the brainstorm leader’s “process” than it does their personality – or lack thereof. In an attempt to become *one-pointed*, they become *one-dimensional*, missing out on a host of opportunities to catalyze the collective genius of the group. Indeed, they would do well to heed the words of the great American poet, Walt Whitman, when he proclaimed that he “contained multitudes.” The same is true for savvy brainstorm facilitators. Or could be if they only gave themselves more permission to be multi-faceted and flex to the moment. Translation? Don’t be a one trick pony. If you are going to play the role of brainstorm facilitator and lead a group through a useful ideation process, be a multitude. Let it rip. Hang ten. Use the right brain and the left. Let all the cats you are out of the proverbial bag... and by so doing, exponentially increase your chances of truly making a difference.

OK. Enough pep talk. Take a few minutes now to rate yourself, on a scale of 1-10, for how much YOU are likely to manifest the following “personas of brainstorm facilitator” at the next brainstorm session you lead. Then focus on your three lowest scores and ask yourself what you can do to bring more of those qualities to bear in your session.

## 1. CONDUCTOR

A skilled brainstorm facilitator knows how to orchestrate powerfully creative output from a seemingly dissonant group of people. In the conductor mode, the facilitator makes sure to include everyone, evokes even the subtlest contributions from the

least experienced member and demonstrates their commitment to the whole by offering immediate feedback to anyone who tends to “get lost in their own song”.

## 2. ALCHEMIST

A good brainstorm facilitator is able to transmute lead into gold – or in modern terms – knows how to help people “get the lead out”. This talent requires an element of wizardry – the ability to see without looking, feel without touching, and intuitively know that within each brainstormer lives a hidden genius just waiting to get out.

## 3. DANCER

Light on their feet, brainstorm facilitators move gracefully through the process of sparking ideas. Able to go from the “cha-cha” to the “polka” to the whirling dervish spinning of a brainstorm group on fire, enlightened facilitators are willing to take bold steps when necessary, even when there is no visible ground underfoot.

“The path is made by walking on it”, is their motto.



## 4. MAD SCIENTIST

An impassioned experimenter, the brainstorm facilitator often takes on the crazed (but grandfatherly) look of an Einstein in heat. While respecting the realm of logic and the rational – the ground upon which most scientists build their homes – the enlightened facilitator is willing to throw it all out the window in the hope of triggering a “happy accident” or a quantum leap of the imagination. Indeed, it is often these non-linear moments that produce the kind of breakthrough thinking which logic can only describe, never actually elicit itself.

## 5. DIAMOND CUTTER

Fully recognizing the precious gem of the human imagination (as well as the delicacy required to set it free) the skilled brainstorm facilitator is a craftsman par

excellence. Focused. Precise. Dedicated. Able to get to the heart of the matter in a single stroke without leaving anything or anyone damaged in the process.



## **6. ACTOR**

Brainstorm facilitators are "on stage" whether they like it or not. All eyes are upon them, as well as all the potential critical reviews humanly possible. More often than not, the facilitator's "audience" will only be moved to act (perchance to dream) if they believe the facilitator is completely into his or her role. If the audience does not suspend this kind of disbelief, the play will close early and everyone will wish they were back home watching TV.

## **7. ENVIRONMENTALIST**

Brainstorm facilitators are the original recyclers. In their relentless pursuit of finding value in the human imagination, they waste absolutely nothing. No thought, no idea, no inkling of a possibility is "trashed" without being acknowledged for some alternative use, some previously undetected possibility. To the enlightened facilitator, there is no such thing as a bad idea, only ideas whose usefulness have not yet been fully explored.

## **8. OFFICER OF THE LAW**

It is one of the brainstorm facilitator's most important jobs to enforce law and order once the group gets roaring down the open highway of the imagination. This is a fine art – for in this territory speeding is encouraged, as is running red lights, jaywalking, and occasionally breaking and entering. Just as thieves have their code of honor, however, so too should brainstormers. It is the facilitator's task to keep this code intact – a task made infinitely easier by the ritual of stating the ground rules at the beginning of a session, and the periodic reinforcement of them as the session proceeds.

## 9. SERVANT

Some brainstorm facilitators, intoxicated by the group energy and their own newly stimulated imagination, use their position as a way to foist their ideas on others – or worse, manipulate the group into their way of thinking. Oops! Brainstorm facilitating is a service, not a personal platform. It is supposed to be a selfless act that enables others to arrive at their own solutions – however different they may be from the facilitator's.

## 10. STAND-UP COMIC

Humor is one of the brainstorm facilitator's most powerful tools. It dissolves boundaries, helps participants get unstuck, and shifts perspective just enough to encourage everyone to open their eyes to new ways of thinking. Trained facilitators are always on the lookout for humorous responses. They know that humor often signals some of the most promising ideas,



and that giggles, guffaws, and laughable side talk frequently indicate a rich vein of ideas to explore. Humor also makes the facilitator more "likable" which makes the group more amenable to the facilitator's direction as the session proceeds. Ever wonder why the words "Aha!" and "Ha-Ha" are so similar?

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