Brainstorming - Rules of the Road

Applying some simple principles when brainstorming can make all the difference!

Leading a team in brainstorming is a powerful way to achieve creative energy...and solutions! A few simple “rules of the road” can ensure that brainstorming sessions are creative and productive. First, establish a few essential norms around brainstorming:

1) Defer judgment by generating suggestions without any evaluation or limits (there will be time for that later, but it impedes good brainstorming);

2) Stay with it, as the best ideas tend to come when the obvious ideas are on the table and a team is digging deeply to identify new thinking and ideas;

3) Piggyback on others’ ideas (but don’t evaluate them);

4) Encourage out of the box ideas;

5) Stay focused on the topic or question at hand by thinking openly and expansively while staying focused on the target topic.

Helpful Tips and Tricks:

- Loosen teams’ creative muscles by brainstorming around a fun topic prior to the actual topic at hand (such as planning the perfect vacation, planning a staff retreat where there is an unlimited budget, or another fun practice topic).

- Establish the rule of brainstorming up front so that teams set aside their evaluative lenses for the initial brainstorming phase.

- Provide gentle reminders when team members begin to evaluate or limit responses (“We can’t do that” or “That solution would be too expensive”). There will be time for all of those considerations when a plan is actually designed, but the goal of brainstorming is to generate wild ideas and as many as possible!

- After brainstorming, group or cluster ideas and look for the themes that emerged.

Reflection Questions:

- How can judgment get in the way of creative brainstorming?

- How can open-ended, creative brainstorming deepen creativity and problem-solving at a school, district, county office of education, or other organization?