How to **stop debating** & **start innovating**

Our top five tips to power productive brainstorming sessions for your team

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The brainstorming process is **busted**

In a regular brainstorming session, your team might have solid ideas, but often only the loudest voices get heard. Invariably the team goes down a rabbit hole with one idea only to forget about the 10 other ideas that people came up with during the conversation.

Now you’re stuck on one idea that may or may not have traction with the whole team, you don’t actually know if it solves your problem, and you can’t figure out how to get back to open collaboration without losing track of where you’ve been.

Other times team members are so married to their idea that they won’t let it go. With no established method to come to a consensus, the team is left in argumentative discussions with everyone simply sticking up for themselves rather than focusing on the common goal.

Your team should be making innovative new products, not getting stuck brainstorming. At Rocksaucē we use Design Sprint tactics to guide our collaboration and keep us focused.

Gather your team together and try out the five tactics we rely on to power productive brainstorming.

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Up Next: Tip #1, Clarify goals to align common intent
Clarify goals to align common intent

During research, you dig to discover why a problem exists. If a group doesn’t agree on the why, then you can’t align common intent.

Example Problem:
Your dog needs to eat while you are away.

A: Make sure your dog is fed while on vacation.

B: Train your dog to eat while you aren’t there.

If your team agrees on Goal A, then you might ideate a solution that involves developing an automated dog feeder so the dog only gets one portion of food per day. The owner sets the feeder before he leaves for vacation and knows that his dog will be fed.

If your team agrees on Goal B, then you might ideate a solution that involves leaving a week’s worth of food in the dog bowl but training the dog to only eat one portion of food per day.

Both of these solutions, based on two different goals, solve the problem. Both solutions mean the dog will be fed while the owner is away. But the solutions and the paths forward are wildly different.

If the team does not agree on one goal, then you will waste time and money talking past each other. Align your team and narrow down the potential solutions by deciding upon a common goal.

Write this goal down and keep it known and visible during the project – perhaps on a whiteboard, tape it to the wall, keep it in a shared doc – whatever is natural for your team. Constantly refer to it and use it to guide your conversations. Taking the time to agree on a common goal will not only help you ideate the best solution, but it will serve the team as they design and develop the product, keeping everyone aligned and focused.

Up Next: Tip #2, Capture and equalize ideas with “How Might We” notes
TIP #2

Capture and equalize with “How Might We...”

Instead of simply blurting out a feature or an idea, keep good ideas from getting lost in the noise of discussion by framing your ideas as, “How Might We...” (HMW)

HMW notes are all about the opportunities that you see surrounding the problem. As the team discusses the current situation and shares existing knowledge, everyone writes down HMWs on sticky notes.

Each HMW note has the same format:

Write it down on a sticky note, anonymous, and 100% opportunistic. Individual voices are kept out of the HMWs so that there is no bias and it opens the brainstorming session to every idea.

Before this part of the meeting closes, the meeting facilitator asks everyone to put their HMWs on a wall. They read each aloud, ensuring that every person in the room is able to have their ideas heard. As a group, you can then start clustering notes into themes to see the big ideas that are taking shape.

With HMW notes, no one needs to worry about being the loudest. Every idea is heard and every idea informs the path of the project moving forward.
TIP #3

Hail the coming Dotmocracy

So many great ideas, but which ones are really the best? Utilize the power of the heatmap Dotmocracy to find out.

When there are a lot of opinions in the room, discovering which ideas have the most traction can seem impossible. Discussing the pros and cons of each idea is time consuming and often derails the team. You may never know which ideas really resonate.

To solve this problem, implement a Dotmocracy. Take time to vote in silence on every idea and perhaps on parts of ideas.

To get started, every solution that the team ideates should be written down. These could even be drawings of the interface that they think would work well with users.

Tack every idea to the wall and pass out dot stickers. Set a timer and, in silence, everyone reviews the ideas and puts a dot on the ideas, or parts of ideas, that they think have the most potential to solve the given problem.

You could even put all of your dots on the same idea. Doing so means you believe strongly in that idea. So much so that you are putting the entire weight of your opinion behind it.

A Dotmocracy prevents designing a product for a single person. Just like everyone in the room, the end users of the product will think in different ways. Having the entire team vote will reveal which ideas have the most traction.

Plus, the Dotmocracy ensures that the best ideas rise to the top. Rather than only hearing scattered opinions as the team talks over each other, you are able to look at what everyone is thinking. The dots create a visual heatmap of potential solutions. Even if you choose not to move forward with an idea that has a lot of traction, you are more informed about what people think.

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Up Next: Tip #4, Designate a Decider
TIP #4

**Designate a Decider**

Great workshopping leads to lots of great ideas. Someone has to do the picking. First, it’s choosing the problem. Then, the solution. Enter: the Decider.

Everyone in the room has some kind of stake in the project, meaning, everyone in the room is connected to the success or failure of the product. Some of these people might include an end user, a designer, a personnel manager, or a developer, and every one of them has a valid point of view.

But they don’t make the final decision.

Designate the Decider before the workshop begins. Choose someone who is ultimately responsible for the success or failure of the product. Who is the driving force for this particular innovation? Who is putting their name behind it?

The Decider’s point of view is based in reality. He/she understands what will be feasible over the life of the entire project. So if the ideas don’t resonate with that person, if they don’t agree with the direction of a particular solution, then everyone needs to go back to the drawing board.

However, the Decider should not enter the room saying, “I’m making the decision here.” The tactics we are recommending encourage a collaborative process during which everyone’s ideas are heard and explained. The Decider should support this creative ideation. This collaborative process gives the Decider the knowledge they need to make an informed decision when it is time to do so.

Designating a Decider ensures that the team remains collaborative and focused and that only ideas that are feasible and based in reality will rise to the top.
TIP #5

Remove hypothetical debate fears with actual testing

Brainstorming and planning sessions can become endless “what-if...” cycles that breed endless debate. Test what you’re proposing to move forward.

**EXECUTE THE IDEA IN SOME WAY**

Build a prototype to get feedback. Create a flow with storyboards, summarize and document conclusions, or build another type of deliverable. Even ideas on sticky notes can be tested with users!

Test with people who have a vested interest in the outcome of the solution

**A SUBJECT MATTER EXPERT**

This is someone who is an expert in the field of the problem you are solving. They will help point out any big gaps that your solution might not be addressing.

**COLLEAGUES**

Do an internal review. These are your coworkers and colleagues, people who have not been part of ideation but who can offer feedback based on their own knowledge.

**END-USERS**

Find out what potential users of your product think of its functionality and value. Does it solve the problem they need solving? You might have built-in users lined up to offer feedback, but if not, you can use websites such as UserIntervews.com and UserTesting.com to find them.

During the interview, ask broad questions to encourage insight you may not have anticipated. Find creative ways to get answers to these primary questions:

1. Is this useful?
2. Is this the correct method to solve the problem?

From this feedback, you will learn if your product is intuitive and a natural extension to solve the problem.

Or, you’ll learn that you just saved a lot of time and money by not building something people didn’t want.

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About **Rocksauce Studios**

We are an **innovation agency** using design thinking, ideation, and facilitation for enterprise digital transformation and software that people want to use.

In short, we do the digging to find your diamond-in-the-rough idea. Then we build a rock-solid foundation for it. How do we do that? We’ll do our best to fit it into this paragraph:

**We use 5-day Design Sprints** to innovate quickly. The first two days are all about keeping the team focused and aligned, taking notes, and ideating viable solutions in a creative and collaborative environment.

Within 5 days we have **prototyped one of the most promising ideas and tested it with users**. From there, the team can move forward to build an informed and successful product.

We love leading these Design Sprints for our clients, helping them communicate more effectively and, together, ideating the best solutions to their biggest problem.
Want to talk with our team?

You have innovative goals. We have innovative solutions.

Book a **Strategy Chat** with us to learn how we’ve helped major brands and how we can help you solve your unique problems. Here are a few things you’ll learn from our 45 minute conversation. We’re excited to learn from you, too!

- How our tailored solution is used to identify your problem and the underlying “why”
- The process we’ve used to help top brands like yours design innovative, effective solutions
- Recommended key next steps to help you get rockin’!

**BOOK YOUR CHAT**

Brands we’ve rocked...

Get help innovating at [rocksaucestudio.com](http://rocksaucestudio.com)

howdy@rocksaucestudios.com 866.981.6847