

# The Road to Eureka

You're only five steps from generating the best ideas of your life and turning your team into a creative wellspring

**T**he year 1953 was a big one for the United States.

Watson and Crick discovered the double-helix structure of DNA. *Playboy* magazine debuted on newsstands. And ad man Alex Osborn popularized the term *brainstorming*, forever etching a flawed psychological tenet into modern corporate culture: the belief that two (or more) heads are better than one. "They're not. At least not always," says Sam Harrison, author of *Zing! Five Steps and 101 Tips for Creativity on Command*. In fact, people tend to generate twice as many ideas alone as they do in a group, according to researchers at the University of Texas at Arlington. Their research, however, outlines a key principle of effective brainstorming: Don't meet to harvest fresh ideas, meet to build on existing ones. So come prepared and then follow these tips to get the creative juices flowing.

**Organize a quintet.** Invite up to five people to your brainstorming session, and then close the list. People tend to ramble off on unproductive tangents in larger groups, corroding collaboration, says Harrison. Research also shows that group productivity wanes when too many people take turns talking instead of spewing out ideas as quickly as they come.

**Warm up.** Begin each brainstorming session with a five-minute unrelated exercise, such as tackling an imaginary problem (e.g., how to light a house with one bulb). "Creativity doesn't flow unless people can forget about their work and get comfortable with one another," says Harrison.



**STORM CHASERS**  
Small groups produce more ideas.

**Encourage wild ideas.** "The only way to know if you've gone far enough is to go too far and then step back," says Jack Foster, author of *How to Get Ideas*. Still, it's important to focus on a goal. "Brainstorming is a type of improvisation, but even improv needs structure," says Harrison. As music legend Quincy Jones put it: The more boundaries you set, the more freedom you have.

**Judge not.** A new idea is delicate, the Roman poet Ovid once noted. It can be killed by a sneer or a yawn, or stabbed to death by a quip. Phrases such as "We've tried it before," "It won't work," and "The client won't like it" should be avoided. "Also never say 'Let's try to come out of here with at least one great idea,'" adds Harrison. "Brainstorming is about quantity, not quality."

**Let your ideas percolate.** Schedule an editing session for a later time, allowing an incubation period for the subconscious to work on the problem. "If participants realize there will be a subsequent session to evaluate ideas, they'll be less likely to jump in with judgment," says Harrison. "Also, never let your sessions exceed one hour. If no ideas have bubbled up by then, regroup another time." SUSAN WELSH