Eight Rules To Brilliant Brainstorming

1. **USE BRAINSTORMING TO COMBINE AND EXTEND IDEAS, NOT JUST HARVEST THEM**
   Andrew Hargadon's How Breakthroughs Happen shows that creativity occurs when people find ways to build on existing ideas. The power of group brainstorming comes from creating a safe place where people with different ideas can share, blend, and expand their diverse knowledge. If your goal is just to collect the creative ideas that are out there, group brainstorms are a waste of time. You may as well stick to a Web-based system for collecting ideas. Even an old-fashioned employee suggestion box is good enough for this limited task.

2. **DON'T BOTHER IF PEOPLE LIVE IN FEAR**
   Groups bring out the best and the worst in people. If people believe they will be teased, paid less, demoted, fired, or otherwise humiliated, group brainstorming is a bad idea. If your company fires 10% of its employees every year, people might be too afraid of saying something dumb to brainstorm effectively.

3. **DO INDIVIDUAL BRAINSTORMING BEFORE AND AFTER GROUP SESSIONS**
   Alex F. Osborn's 1950s classic, Applied Imagination, which popularized brainstorming, gave sound advice: Creativity comes from a blend of individual and collective "ideation." This means building in time for people to think and learn about the topic before the group brainstorm, as well as time to reflect about what happened after the meetings. When I studied the IDEO team as they developed a new hair-cutting device, engineer Roby Stancel told me that he prepared for the session by going to a local hardware store to look at all kinds of cutting machines—lawn mowers, hedge clippers, and weed whackers—to inspire him before the group session.

4. **BRAINSTORMING SESSIONS ARE WORTHLESS UNLESS IDEAS LEAD TO ACTION**
   Brainstorming is just one of many techniques that make a company creative. It is of little value if it's not combined with observing consumers, talking to experts, or building prototype products and experiences that provide an outlet for the ideas generated. I've worked with "creative" companies that are great at coming up with ideas, but never implement them. I once studied a team that spent a year brainstorming and arguing about a simple product without producing a single prototype, even though a good engineer could have built one in an hour. The project was finally killed when a competitor came out with a similar product.

5. **BRAINSTORMING REQUIRES SKILL AND EXPERIENCE BOTH TO DO—AND ESPECIALLY—TO FACILITATE**
   Not everyone can walk into a room and lead a productive brainstorming session. It is not a job for amateurs. In all the places I've seen brainstorming used effectively—Hewlett-Packard, SAP's Design Services Team, the Hasso Plattner Institute of Design at Stanford University, the Institute for the Future, frog design, and IDEO—brainstorming is treated as a skill that takes months or years to master. Facilitating a session is a leadership skill that takes even longer to develop.

6. **A GOOD BRAINSTORMING SESSION IS COMPETITIVE—IN THE RIGHT WAY**
   In the best brainstorms, people compete to get everyone else to contribute, to make everyone feel like part of the group, and to treat everyone as collaborators toward a common goal. The worst thing a manager can do is set up the session as an "I win, you lose" game, in which ideas are explicitly rated, ranked, and rewarded. A Stanford grad student once told me about a team leader at his former company who started giving bonuses to people who generated the best ideas in brainstorms. The resulting fear and dysfunction drastically reduced the number of ideas generated by what had once been a creative and cooperative group.

7. **BRAINSTORMING SESSIONS CAN BE USED FOR MORE THAN JUST GENERATING IDEAS**
   Brainstorms are places to listen, learn, and educate. At IDEO, they support the company's culture and work practices. Project teams use brainstorms to get input from people with diverse skills throughout the company. Knowledge is spread about new industries and technologies. Newcomers and veterans learn about who knows what. The explicit goal of a group brainstorm is to generate ideas. But the other benefits of routinely gathering rotating groups of people from around an organization to talk about ideas might ultimately be more important for supporting creative work.

8. **FOLLOW THE RULES, OR DON'T CALL IT A BRAINSTORM**
   This is true even if you hold only occasional brainstorms and even if your work doesn't require constant creativity. The worst brainstorms happen when the term is used loosely and the rules aren't followed at all. Perhaps the biggest mistake that leaders make is failing to keep their mouths shut. I once went to a meeting that started with the boss saying: "Let's brainstorm." He followed this pronouncement with 30 minutes of his own rambling thoughts, without a single idea coming from the room. Now, that's productivity loss!