

60 Ideas: A ToP Thinklet

Discussion created by Sheila LeGeros on 4/17/2009 11:48 AM

Posted by [Sheila LeGeros](#) on 4/17/2009 11:48 AM

Hi Wayne, Thank you very much for submitting the 60 Ideas ToP Thinklet in the Files tab of our huddle. I appreciate your efforts. It stimulates a question about ToP that I would like to pose to the group. In Wayne's Thinklet he names 35 to 60 ideas as optimal in consensus workshop. In the procedures we use in the USA, it names 35 to 45 ideas as optimal.

- 1) What do you find is the optimal number range for idea generation?
- 2) What are the benefits of going beyond 45 ideas, especially in a virtual meeting?
- 3) What are the risks of going beyond 45 ideas, especially in the virtual world?
- 4) When is it helpful to intentionally generate fewer than 35 ideas, especially in the virtual world?

Best regards, Sheila

[Wayne Nelson](#)

Posted by [Wayne Nelson](#) on 4/17/2009 1:19 PM

I usually think of about 60 as optimal for a ToP workshop. When you get closer to 70, you start getting a significant amount of duplication - actually direct duplication. That's especially true in a group that does not think very deeply. Overlapping ideas gives you texture of thought, but duplication doesn't and we're looking for distinct ideas.

Benefit of going beyond 45

You get a wider spectrum of thought. More diversity of ideas. More texture in the thinking.

You get more of the ideas that are closer to the margins of what you might think of as the normal, expected, culturally acceptable responses to a question. You tend to pick up some of the wilder ideas.

You get variations on familiar themes. Often groups will already be thinking and discussing these questions and will have come up with a few major themes. With more than 45 ideas, you get texture within these themes.

You gain more possibility of "out of the box" thinking that leads to breakthroughs in understanding and general new group knowledge.

The clustering of ideas gets more meaningful, because there are more nuances to deal with as you find themes.

The dialogue that happens along with the clustering (which is absolutely critical) is much richer.

With more ideas, more texture and nuance and richer dialogue, it is much easier to get less abstraction in the naming of the major themes. The more concretion you get at this level, the more likely it is to produce innovative thinking.

You tend to get more than 1 or 2 ideas per person. That leads to more investment in the process and more commitment to the results

Risks of going beyond 45

The clustering takes just a little longer. That frustrates some people, especially those who have trouble working with ambiguity.

We don't have very good ways to cluster ideas in the virtual realm; so fewer ideas will be easier.

When to generate less than 35

When the scope of the topic is very narrow and specific

When the group is very small - like a team of 3 - 5 people

[Wayne Nelson](#)

Posted by [Wayne Nelson](#) on 4/17/2009 1:35 PM

I asked Danny Mittleman for his thoughts directly. Here are his comments (in red) and my responses. **Are you sure this is one Thinklet, and not three? Can the three steps of this Thinklet be decomposed and used separately with other activities?** I'm not sure of anything. This is my first Thinklet. By the time we do 10 or so different ones, we'll know how many angels dance on the head of that pin. Action learning. Steps 1 and 2 could definitely be one thinklet. Step 3 would be another one or one option for a second step. You couldn't, however, use step 3 on it's own, because you'd have no data to process. ToP uses steps 1 and 2 in nearly every form of brainstorming we ever do. **What is the purpose of the Select step? Noting in the group brainstorm step makes reference to the three stars.** The group brainstorm step needs to be more explicit about that. The starred items are the ones people share first. People make a list. The more the better. Step 2 – selecting their best ideas gives them an opportunity to pick among their initial

list. The initial list is the most objective level thinking. Selecting takes them quickly and intuitively through the reflective level to the interpretive level where they determine the ideas that are the most relevant, will make the most difference, respond most creatively to the focus question, the most radically transformative etc. Then, at the decisional level, they pick 2 – 3. That's where they begin in the small group work. This is pre-rational intentionally, but the selecting provides a little bit of a filter. For the participants, it places everyone on the same level. They all have a thought through idea to begin the conversation. The vocal extraverted ones do not dominate the quiet, introverted ones. It enhances participation and gives everyone in the group the tangible sense that they have something significant to contribute. It builds anticipation. **From the description there is not clarity as to why this is “60 ideas”. There is N number of 3-4 people teams each producing 10 ideas. It is only 60 if there are six teams.** I think the description should be written better. The rationale is down in the tips section. We've found that 60 is an optimal number for a ToP Consensus Workshop. When a group gets to - say 70 – 75 ideas, there will be very obvious duplication – especially of ideas that are the “low hanging fruit.” When you get down below 35 – 40 ideas, you get less duplication and overlap and much more abstraction when ideas are clustered. There's just not enough texture on the thought to get high quality results.

The dividing into small groups is not so clear. We've found that for this kind of exercise, a small group works best. 2 – 4 people. You take the number of people in the whole group and work out how many teams of 2 – 4 people you have. Then you divide 60 by the number of groups. That tells you how many ideas are needed from each small group.

There is discussion of how to prevent each team from producing redundant ideas, but no discussion of how to prevent redundant ideas from emerging across teams – perhaps that is part of a follow on Thinklet. That happens in the next Thinklet in this series.

[Daniel Mittleman](#)

Posted by [Daniel Mittleman](#) on 4/27/2009 4:20 PM

Wayne, We might want to also notice that David Straus also explores “Patterns” in [_How to Make Collaboration Work_](#) but Straus calls them "heuristics" and presents 64 of them.