

Brain dump exercise

What's the point of this tool?

This is a workshop exercise that can be used in a variety of different situations to encourage people to have their say in a non confrontational way. It gives individuals an opportunity to contribute to the conversation, so you get to hear from the rowdy and the quite ones.

To demonstrate how to use it, we'll focus on an example of trying to fix a fractured team by getting a common understanding of the team's strengths and areas for improvement.

When to use this tool

When you need to get people's thoughts out in the open in a way that feels safe for them and encourages the team to discuss the topic in a constructive manner.

A simple table

What's working well	What's not working? OR What could be improved?

How to use

1. Pull your team together for a 30 to 45-minute workshop and set clear expectations of the purpose of the session. In this example, the objective is to discuss how the team works together – what we do well and what can be improved.
2. When you start the workshop, re-iterate the objective and encourage the team to be open minded, honest and constructive.
3. If running the workshop *virtually*
 - Pop the table (pictured left) into a shared document using your chosen platform (Google Docs, OneNote etc)
 - Ask everyone to start adding their thoughts to each column in short sentences (no more than 8–10 words per thought). Tell them it's OK if they have the same thought as someone else because you're looking for common themes. (or ask them to do this step prior to the workshop)
 - Once done, ask for clarity if the meaning of a specific point is not clear.
 - Start highlighting the key themes in each column.
3. If running the workshop *in person*
 - Draw the table (pictured left) on a whiteboard or on two pieces of butcher's paper.
 - Give everyone some large post-it notes and a thick pen and ask them to write down their thoughts for each column - one thought per post-it.
 - Ask them to stick the post-its under the relevant columns.
 - Once all the post-its are up, ask for clarity if the meaning of a specific point is not clear
 - Start grouping the notes into key themes
4. Pick three key themes from each column. This will give you the top 3 strengths and the top 3 areas that need improvement.
5. Have an open conversation with the team about the 3 areas of improvement. Discuss what the team could do differently and agree to at least one change per area of improvement.
6. Ask each member of the team individually if they are prepared to work together to make the agreed changes. This step is important because it drives accountability.

TIP: If you have a large team, break them into smaller groups to complete the table. Ask each group to do a brain dump, agree to the top 3 themes in each column, and report back to the group.