

UBA  
HR Elements

## Ideas and information for human resource professionals



## Brainstorm Techniques to Elevate Team Creativity



“How should we fix this problem?” is a question that has been asked time and again in the boardroom, around the lunch table and likely on your last Zoom call at work. In this scenario, some may look to the most experienced person in the room or on the call to decide. Sometimes we

invite the group to share feedback on what was done the last time. Instead of using one of these common solutions, try inviting one of these [brainstorming techniques](#) to your next meeting to elevate team creativity.

### Start with a word game.

Free association is the process of relaying the first word that comes to mind based upon another word or image. During the process, don't stick to a specific structure; rather let new words generate organically from the group at random. This exercise taps into your subconscious and opens the door to new ideas or considerations that brainstormers would have previously kept under wraps. Identify a member of the team to take notes, set a timer and go!

### Reframe the question.

Another technique involves restating the original question in ten different ways to frame the problem in a new way. For example, you may start with the inquiry, “How can we increase our client service rates?” Your team can then rally to come up with related questions such as:

- What does exceptional client service look like at our company?
- What does exceptional client service mean to our clients?
- How would we know we were delivering exceptional client service?

This simple reframing can help generate new ideas and may outline a better question for the group to answer.

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## Invite “outsiders” to the table.

What is mundane to you may be novel to someone else. That’s why it pays to invite a special guest to your next brainstorm session. Invite colleagues who work in different functions; they can add new information to the story or look at the problem from a different point of view. Invite individuals from other companies altogether; you can ask them to participate in your brainstorm or invite them to present on a topic prior to your team attacking a problem. A new perspective goes a long way in opening creative pathways. And if you can’t find someone available for that meeting, bring an inspirational Ted Talk to kick off the session.

In summary, doing the same thing and expecting different results will unlikely lead to amazing results. Instead, [try a new tactic](#). Even something as basic as hosting the meeting in a new location or asking attendees to step outside can get creative juices flowing.

## First-Time Manager Faux Pas



Just like a bad Yelp review, most employees can recall a boss (or two) that they would give a low management rating. Maybe it was the boss who didn’t respect their time outside of the office or the one who asked for results with an unreasonably short deadline. Or maybe it was the supervisor who didn’t take the time to get to know their new direct report. Regardless of the reason, even the best supervisors will make mistakes or decisions that their employees don’t support. Managers are human too!

The leap from individual contributor to manager is a big one and deserves thoughtful preparation. [New managers](#) want to avoid these common manager faux pas when taking the leap to leadership.

**Not acknowledging a change in relationship with peers.** Let’s first acknowledge that being promoted to manage a team of your peers is tough to begin with. One day, you’re making plans for after work happy hour, the next day you’re giving feedback on their performance. It’s incredibly important to discuss this relationship change with each member of your new team. Tell them what may be different now that you are their manager. For example, you may need to limit your lunch dates with your “bestie” to avoid complaints of favoritism. Open the floor to their concerns or questions as well; avoiding this topic may lead to resentment.

**Focusing on “doing” instead of leading.** Some employees moving into management can’t seem to keep their hands out of the day-to-day. Instead of providing guidance or removing obstacles from the path of their team, they micromanage or take parts of the work back to complete. Often, they fall back into execution because it’s what they did best in their prior role. In some cases, a star salesperson or excellent analyst may find in due time that they prefer being in the independent contributor role to managing. This is okay! It’s good to know yourself and your preferences.

**Making drastic changes early in the transition.** A big management blunder occurs when a leader comes into a new role and immediately trashes existing ideas, processes, and roadmaps with the intent of starting from scratch. It’s key to observe and listen to feedback from those



around you prior to making changes. There is a story behind every decision, and what at first glance may look like a poor solution, may in fact make a lot of sense when you ask those around you and investigate further. This is a hard one as new managers may feel the need to prove their competency early on. Hold back! This restraint is a sign of your maturity as a leader.

New supervisors can avoid some common gaffes if they avoid the rookie mistakes above. [Managing other people](#) is hard; don't let anyone tell you otherwise! It's important for managers to build trust by showing vulnerability with a new team. A manager willing to admit they make mistakes and don't know everything will encourage strong relationships with their employees.

## Take Ten: The 50-Minute Meeting

The clock on the computer screen blinks 3:00 p.m. and it dawns on you that you haven't eaten your first (or second!) meal of the day. Nor have you stood up from your desk to stretch your legs or used the restroom. Your back feels tight and you have the early stages of a raging migraine. The diagnosis? Meeting fatigue. You had a calendar full of back-to-back meetings with zero time for yourself and are starting to feel the repercussions.

[Research shows](#) that employees' stress levels mount as they bounce from meeting to meeting without a break, even when working from home. The solution? It could be as simple as cutting ten minutes from your hour-long meeting.



Microsoft's Human Factors Lab recently conducted an experiment to investigate the toll continuous meetings take on our physical and mental health. They looked specifically at the brain's reaction to a full day of meetings. Beta waves, the brain activity associated with stress, increased when study participants were shuttled from meeting to meeting without a meaningful break. It is also key to know that the actual transition from each meeting (dialing in to a new call or gathering your notes to walk to a new location) tended to add to their stress levels as well. Without a chance for a real break, your stress levels only increase as a meeting-filled day goes on. You may be on overload by the time you are called on to deal with an unexpected situation and overreact because of this "trigger stacking."

The good news? When participants were given just ten minutes of down time to rest or meditate, their beta waves decreased. This reset time allowed them to be more present and engaged in their next meeting. So, the real question is, do you want your meeting participants to be alert and ready to innovate? Or are you okay with participants who are too stressed to focus?

While scientists are tackling the long-term solution, a good step in the right direction is to limit the meeting length at your organization (or at least on your calendar) to allow for rest breaks. Introducing this idea at work can start with little fanfare – model the behavior first. Start scheduling your meetings to start ten minutes after the hour or plan for an early departure. Communicate the reason for this adjustment and what you plan to do with the time: "Our meeting is going to run 50 minutes, so we all have a chance to rest and refocus before our next commitment. I plan to take my dog outside for a few minutes and come back ready to go!"



## The Pomodoro Technique: Can You Find More Time with Tomatoes?

Who holds the key to time management? Is it your partner who diligently uses a paper planner to chart out all meetings in pencil? Or your boss who devotes the last hour of their day to track and organize projects? Or maybe it's you? You fire up your laptop hours before your peers so you can experience some of that sweet uninterrupted prime time where you blast through hours of work. Corporate America has revisited the riddle of proper time management for years, resulting in a slew of potential solutions to rehabilitate your calendar quandary. There are models, methods, and technologies galore! One of those methods to consider in the quest for time management transcendentalism is the [Pomodoro technique](#). This method may be a good solution for employees looking to find more focus in their workday.



The Italian productivity advocate Francesco Cirillo invented the Pomodoro Technique. The first part of the name, pomodoro, is the Italian word for tomato; Francesco used a timer in the shape of this ruby red vegetable (or fruit, depending on who you ask!) to track his time and keep him on task.

There are [five simple steps](#), and just like Francesco, you only need a timer (a phone timer will work just fine) to start.

1. Identify your list of action items/tasks for the day
2. Set a timer for 25 minutes (a “pomodoro”)
3. Work on one focused task until the timer sounds
4. Take a five-minute break to stand up, rest, etc.
5. Repeat on a new task, tracking how many “pomodoros” it took you to complete each task

Though the guidelines are simple, the rules are stricter. First, no cheating! You may be curious about an email that pinged your inbox, or want to check the weather, but you must wait until your five-minute break. Second, you must track how many “pomodoros” it takes for you to complete each task. This part of the process refines your ability to estimate future assignments. And third, you can't keep working even if you really, really want to and can't cut the time short, either. The process relies on dedicated work time mixed with consistent breaks to free up your thoughts. In fact, the Pomodoro Technique requires that you take a larger break after completing three or four “pomodoros.”

Fans of the method enjoy the dedicated deep thought time and like that they can clearly see their accomplishments, or “pomodoros,” at the end of the day. Certain jobs lend themselves nicely to this technique. For example, coders using an agile framework may already be comfortable estimating their time and completing focused tasks. On a similar note, the work of writers and website designers is also a potentially good match because the final work product is easily diced into smaller subtasks. On the other hand, the Pomodoro Technique may be more



difficult to implement for client-facing roles or those that require a meeting-heavy schedule. Workers that don't control their schedule may have trouble implementing this strategy since they would be regularly pulled from their work sprints.

Curious? Try it out! Take a week to pilot and see if adding this type of structure helps you stay focused.

## Employer Webinar

***Save the date for the next UBA Employer Webinar.***

**Tuesday, September 14, 2021 • 2:00 p.m. Eastern**

Check the [UBA website](#) or contact your local UBA Partner Firm for registration information.