



EPISODE 118

Your Best Idea Was Never Said

The best idea for your biggest problem was probably in the room at your last meeting — and nobody said it out loud. Drawing on Utley and Klebahn's *Ideaflow* and Diehl and Stroebe's research, Maya and Marcus show why brainstorms underproduce — and how leaders two levels up redesign where ideas come from.

KEY STRATEGIES & IDEAS

1. Quantity Drives Quality

You cannot judge an idea until you test it, so your opinion about which idea is brilliant is less reliable than you think. Generate a flood, then test the promising ones cheaply and fast.

2. Production Blocking: Waiting Kills Ideas

Only one person can talk at a time, so everyone else holds an idea while waiting for a gap. Ideas fade while you wait — some never survive it. In Diehl and Stroebe's studies, people forced to wait produced roughly half as many ideas as people who could contribute the moment an idea arrived.

3. Evaluation Apprehension Grows With Rank

People edit themselves because they do not want to sound foolish — and it gets measurably worse when a senior leader is in the room. The higher you sit, the more your presence suppresses the very thing you called the meeting for.

4. Nominal Groups Beat Interactive Brainstorms

A meta analysis of twenty studies found that groups brainstorming out loud produce fewer and weaker ideas than the same people generating alone, with ideas pooled afterwards. The bigger the group, the bigger the shortfall — and free riding plus premature convergence quietly end the search.

The proof: Daniel's planning meetings polished the first sensible fix and stopped. He changed the process, not the people: the problem went out two days early, everyone arrived with written ideas produced alone, and everything was pooled. The list surfaced an unglamorous fix from a quiet analyst that the team tested — cheaply and successfully.



ACTION & REFLECTION STEPS

- ☐ **Step one — move generation out of the meeting.** Send the problem in advance, ask each person to write ideas alone, and pool everything before you gather. Count what arrives. That count is your ideaflow.

The problem I will send out — and when ideas are due back:

- ☐ **Step two — speak last and mean it.** Let the meeting build and combine, not perform for you. Hold your view until everyone else has been heard, because the moment the senior voice lands, the range of thinking narrows.
- ☐ **Step three — choose tests, not winners.** Leave with a small set of ideas you will actually test, each with a cheap and fast way to learn from it.
- ☐ **Step four — build the daily habit.** Seed a problem in your mind at night, then write ten ideas about it in the morning. Ten will feel like a stretch. That stretch is the training.

My ten ideas this morning:

- ☐ **Reflect on this:** in your last three meetings, how many ideas existed before the first person spoke — and how many were still alive ten minutes later?
- ☐ I have counted the ideas that existed before anyone spoke in my last three meetings.

Think two levels up. — Maya & Marcus