When Conflict Enhances Creativity in Brainstorming

ABSTRACT

Historically, scholars and practitioners alike asserted that criticism was harmful to group brainstorming. However, newer research has challenged this assumption, arguing that conflict (as manifested by criticism, dissent, or debate) can enhance the number and quality of ideas generated. Most of these prior studies on idea generation in brainstorming have examined the ideation process in isolation, whereas in many real-world contexts the task of ideation is inextricably linked to the task of evaluation (Harvey and Kou, 2013). We hypothesized that the purpose of brainstorming (i.e., ideation alone vs. ideation plus evaluation) moderates the effect of conflict on group creativity. To test this theory, we conducted a field experiment comprised of 100 brainstorming sessions in the context of a university urban redevelopment project. Results showed that among groups instructed to ideate only, groups in which members were encouraged to criticize one another’s ideas generated a greater number of ideas and more creative ideas than did groups discouraged from criticism. Conversely, among groups instructed to ideate first and then to reach a consensus regarding the best idea, groups encouraged to criticize generated fewer and less creative ideas than did groups discouraged from criticism. Mediation analyses suggest that the instruction to only ideate fostered a more positive interpretation of conflict than instructions to ideate plus reach consensus, and that this difference in interpretation, in turn, led to differences in brainstorming outcomes.