

Ideation Norms for People-Centered Problem-Solving

Ideation is a core phase in the people-centered (or human-centered) design process, where creativity is intentionally unleashed to generate a wide range of ideas and possible solutions to a clearly defined problem.

Establishing clear norms before ideation creates the psychological safety necessary for creative thinking. These norms are the foundation that allows teams to tap into their collective creativity and wisdom, generating solutions that would be impossible for any individual working alone. By explicitly discussing and agreeing to these guidelines at the start of your session, you create an environment where innovative ideas can flourish and where every team member feels empowered to contribute.

Goal

To support education and nonprofit leaders in creating a psychologically safe environment that enables all participants to contribute freely, builds on collective wisdom, and generates innovative solutions that genuinely address stakeholder needs identified during the discovery phase.

Advice

- Introduce these norms at the beginning of every ideation session, even with established teams
- Post the norms visibly in the room during your session as a consistent reference
- Model these behaviors yourself as the facilitator
- Gently redirect the group when norms are breached without shaming individuals
- Regularly check in with participants about how well the norms are being maintained
- Adapt the language of these norms to match your organizational culture
- Revisit and refine these norms based on what works best for your specific team



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Core Ideation Norms

1 - Defer Judgment

Temporarily suspend evaluation of ideas during the generation phase.

- Establish separate times for generating vs. evaluating ideas
- Gently redirect when evaluation happens prematurely
- Model nonjudgmental responses to all contributions

2 - Encourage Wild Ideas

Welcome unusual or seemingly impractical suggestions, as they often contain valuable elements or inspire breakthrough thinking.

- Explicitly invite unconventional thinking
- Celebrate creative risk-taking
- Look for valuable elements in unexpected places

3- Build on Others' Ideas

Use "yes, and..." thinking to expand and combine ideas rather than dismissing or replacing them.

- Acknowledge the original idea before building on it
- Practice connecting seemingly unrelated ideas
- Notice and appreciate helpful building behaviors

4 - Stay Focused on the Challenge

Keep ideation connected to the reframed problem statement and stakeholder needs identified during discovery.

- Keep the problem statement visible to all
- Gently reconnect tangential ideas to the core challenge
- Take breaks to review stakeholder needs

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Core Ideation Norms

5 - Go for Quantity

Generate many ideas before beginning evaluation; quantity leads to quality in ideation.

- Set ambitious targets for idea generation
- Use timed sprints to maintain momentum
- Track ideas visibly to build energy

6 - One Conversation at a Time

Ensure all voices and ideas are heard by avoiding side conversations and interruptions.

- Use structured turn-taking when needed
- Provide multiple ways to contribute (verbal and written)
- Actively invite quieter voices into the conversation

7 - Make Ideas Visible

Capture ideas in ways everyone can see to enable building and connecting.

- Use large visual surfaces (whiteboards, chart paper)
- Employ visual thinking when possible
- Designate someone to document without judging

8 - Embrace Diverse Thinking Styles

Recognize and value different approaches to ideation and problem-solving.

- Vary activities to engage different thinking preferences
- Allow both individual reflection and group interaction
- Appreciate both systematic and intuitive contributions