

Leaders Gain Valuable Insights Through Mastermind Groups

by Christine W. Zust, M.A.



Two heads are always better than one, but how about 6, 8, or 10 heads? Welcome to the world of mastermind groups, a growing business phenomenon that is being used by leaders around the world for problem-solving, inspiration and motivation. Built on the foundation of trust, confidentiality and harmony, the group forms a collective brain trust to address some of life's greatest challenges.

Working together

Mastermind groups share the basic philosophy that more can be accomplished in less time by working together. Comprised of individuals who meet in an open, supportive environment on a regular basis, the mastermind group's sole purpose is to share thoughts, ideas, opinions and information. As individuals, we have the ability to see things from our own perspective, our own world view. By adding others to the mix, the group has a greater ability to share a combined intellect to see things from a new and different perspective; what some call the "third mind." It is that collective third mind that processes and distills information down to its essence, and it is there that thoughts crystallize into ideas. It is also where the "Aha!" moment occurs. As individuals, we cannot achieve this on our own because our myopic view can cloud our perspective. As a group, the possibilities for expansive thinking are endless.

Some mastermind groups are industry-specific. Other groups are broader based, with representatives from different businesses joining to brainstorm ideas on a variety of topics. Groups can address professional or personal issues, or both. Striving toward success and creating a positive, dynamic learning environment allows members to embrace their new-found "community."

Great expectations – laying the ground rules

When creating or joining a mastermind group, it is crucial to establish a clear-cut sense of purpose. Everyone in the group must buy into the purpose. These early stages of development are critical to the group's future success. If everyone in the group had a different expectation, disaster would be inevitable. Using the simple 5 Ws and H provides guidelines. Who will be members of the group? What is the group's main purpose? What is our topic for discussion? When, where, and how often will we meet? Why will we meet? How will the meetings be structured? The questions are endless. If the group does not seem like a good fit for you, to another group or create your own.

Members of a mastermind group learn quickly that they must leave their ego at the door. Those who are unwilling to relinquish power won't last long. Problems can occur when some members have unrealistic expectations of the group or they don't grasp the concept of collective thinking. Some members may expect the group to solve all of their business or personal problems, or they may want to use the group as a therapy session. Groups who have self-centered, dominant members may self-destruct if the group allows that behavior to continue. Individual members like this can undermine the true purpose of the group's formation. An individual member who tries to overpower the group will either be warned, or will eventually be voted out of the group, because that person throws off the balance of the group.

Trust and harmony form the foundation

The success of a mastermind group is built on the foundation of trust and harmony. As some members explain, the process of building trust can take as long as a year before group members feel comfortable with each other. That comfort comes from sharing information and ideas, and learning to accept opinions openly and willingly. If only safe, polite comments are shared, nothing is gained, nor is the feedback valuable. Members don't benefit from a group of yes people. They want diversity of opinions and backgrounds from members who will offer constructive criticism and valuable opinions that encourage others to look at an issue with fresh eyes.

Gary Ralston, senior business consultant at Ralston Consulting in Columbus, Ohio, says that trust deepens as the group forms. “Confidentiality, like a water-tight bond, is the most important part of mastermind groups,” Ralston says. “Everywhere else, you want your business to look good to the rest of the world, but in a mastermind group, you can admit anything without being penalized because everything discussed stays in the group.” He adds, “We live in our own blind spots. Mastermind groups allow us to accurately locate reality.”

Sustainability

Mike Benz, executive director and CEO of United Way Services in Cleveland, Ohio, has for the past four years been a member of a group of executives that has met monthly. Few members have come and gone from the program during that time, but Benz explains, it is critical to select the right people. “Not just anyone can come into the program. They must be invited to become part of the group.” The first year, he explains, focused on developing trust. Between the second and third year, the group hit a few bumps in the road, which were ironed out. By the fourth year, the group established its momentum. “You have to make a commitment to yourself and your group members that you’re in it for the long term,” Benz adds. Seeking feedback from group members keeps the group productive. Ralston points out that his group always ends its meetings by asking each person to reflect on what worked and what didn’t in the meeting, and how the group can improve the next meeting. It keeps the group focused and on track.

Group members determine how often the group meets. Members who are physically located in the same city might meet monthly. Others, who may be located in the same state, may opt for bi-monthly or quarterly meetings. Members of national mastermind groups opt for meeting about twice a year. Some mastermind group members choose to meet by telephone to keep in touch until they can meet in person, using bridge line teleconferencing. The duration of meetings depends on the group, but most meet for two to four hours; others who meet less frequently may opt to meet for a half or full-day. The group decides. Often, if a mastermind group has achieved the goals it set in the beginning, it may disband. For others, the group may meet with the same people for a decade or longer.

Some advice

Gary Ralston has participated in two mastermind groups – one is industry-specific; another, business-related. He offers the following advice to mastermind newbies:

- Establish the group’s protocol before the group is formed.
- Take charge and be choosy about who you select as members in the starting group.
It’s better to start off small, and build the group than to go for volume without substance.
- Know how to fire a group member if things aren’t working out. Decide how you will eliminate group members before you form the group. If you wait until the group is up and running, and a problem exists, it will be too late to backtrack.
- Don’t fool yourself. If you are not making a difference to other group members, or they are not making a difference to you, it might be time to find another group that is better suited to your needs.

If you are looking for a way to take your thinking to the next level, becoming a member of a mastermind group may be a solution worthy of your consideration. The benefits that a well-organized mastermind group can bring to your business and your life can be invaluable.

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