



By [Heidi Adkisson](#)

At Blink, we feel one of the greatest strengths we bring to clients is the extent to which we leverage our internal expertise—and work with clients—in a collaborative way. But **effective** collaboration is not a slam-dunk. The key is to tap into individual competencies and perspectives in a way that improves the outcome rather than hinders it.

The reason teamwork and brainstorming get so much “play” in the business community is that they have demonstrated potential to produce superior solutions. One of the first exercises I did in business school was a survival exercise where you are placed in a fictional scenario (in the case, a plane crash in the Cascade Mountains). You have limited number of items you can select (things like a flashlight, skis, a mirror) to enhance your chances of survival. The goal was to select the “right” things based on the experience of military experts. First we all did the exercise individually. Next we were divided into teams and worked on the exercise collaboratively. It wasn’t easy - we had to come to consensus on which items to select. However, almost everyone’s team score on the exercise was higher—in many cases significantly higher—than the individual score.

However, as anyone who has worked on a team that isn’t functioning well knows, teams can also come up with weak “design by committee” solutions that just don’t work. Or one person in the group can dominate, causing others to acquiesce to an inferior solution. Or the team can fall prey to group think, where the team is so consumed with maintaining harmony that it interferes with each individual’s critical thinking.

In our experience, we have found several key factors help avoid pitfalls common in collaborative efforts:

- Individual preparation
- An open atmosphere

- A clear understanding on how decisions will be made

## Individual preparation

Earlier this year, an article in the Wall Street Journal highlighted some of the pitfalls of brainstorming sessions. Among other factors, the article stressed the importance of individual preparation:

*David Perkins, a professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, warns that sometimes group sessions can result in one person's bad idea tainting and limiting the range of others' ideas. "The best way to get good ideas is to get people to write them down privately and then bring them in," he says.*

Professor Perkins observation is consistent with our experience. People need to spend time thinking through problems on their own first. Coming in cold to a brainstorming session is usually a recipe for wasted efforts.

## An open atmosphere

Most user experience professionals have experience conducting user research and usability evaluations – and are therefore aware of how facilitation, if done poorly, can impact the behavior of participants. With group facilitation there is the added challenge of managing the group dynamic.

Our work with clients is highly collaborative. After all, they are the experts in their domain. We are sometimes brought in as an impartial third party to lend a fresh perspective to issues that may be divisive within a group. The client may have even conducted testing or other research on their own, but each party has a different interpretation of the results that supports their position. As a third party, we can come in and “ask the dumb” questions, challenge existing assumptions, and facilitate discussion in a way that helps encourage idea exploration.

Again, quoting from the recent Wall Street Journal article:

*When the goal really is ideas, some companies resort to hiring facilitators. Outsiders don't have political dogs in the fight and can, as Bill Hall learned, make people “get back in line.”*

Where it's not possible to bring in a third party, you can use an internal person as facilitator whose role it is to create an open environment for discussion that allows a range of ideas to be heard. It's much like facilitating a focus group—if people have come prepared with their ideas you can ensure more even participation by going around the table and giving each person an opportunity to be heard. Or, in more free-form discussion, politely move the focus away from someone who is dominating and ask for the thoughts of someone who has been sitting more on the sidelines. Often these quiet types have good listening skills that help them form well-considered opinions.

## A clear understanding on how decisions will be made

Sometimes people equate brainstorming with census decision-making – meaning that they

expect the group will work until they find solutions that the entire group can agree to. However, the process of brainstorming and other collaborations may only be input used by a final decision-maker. In a worst-case scenario, decisions have already been made – and collaborative efforts are in reality window-dressing to make people feel like they were a part of the process. Major misunderstandings can occur if there is a difference between the expected decision-making process and the actual one.

Decision-making ultimately can be the hardest part of any collaborative process. Unless there is clear consensus, someone may leave feeling that their ideas were bypassed. In many non-profit environments, consensus decision making is the norm because group harmony tends to be more highly favored. However, gaining consensus is generally a more lengthy process.

Typically, in a for-profit environment, there is a project owner who will make the final call. But there can be tremendous variation in leadership style. Some styles are more autocratic – where ideas are briefly heard before quickly closing on a decision. Others lean more towards consensus and are hesitant to make a decision where there is no clear prevailing opinion. To avoid misunderstandings and hard feelings, it's important for the entire group to understand the style of decision-making that will be employed.

## Collaboration for design

Keeping in mind the above principles, there are a couple of different collaborative approaches we use at Blink for interactive design. At a minimum, we conduct a design review, where the lead designer creates the design and then asks others to review it and provide feedback. These sessions often lead to exploring design alternatives – a fresh pair of eyes on a design problem can provide new insights into solving a particular design problem. We also may employ parallel problem solving – where two or more designers tackle the same problem independently and then come together to compare and contrast solutions. This approach is particularly fruitful for larger, more complex design problems.

We also lead collaborative sessions with clients – most commonly when they are having difficulty articulating or agreeing on system requirements. One approach is to get the stakeholders in a room and begin sketching out screen flows on a white board. This allows for immediate feedback and quick re-working. It's also highly visual, which tends to be easier for people to grasp than more abstract representations of requirements such as use case narratives or flow diagrams.

And, of course, all our client meetings are highly collaborative. We bring one set of expertise (user experience) and the client brings another (expertise in their domain). The key is to create a synthesis of these perspectives to arrive at the best possible solution—which, of course, we will then test with users.

With the right kind of planning and approach, we have seen a very high return on the time invested in collaborative efforts. Not only is it fruitful, but it can be fun, interesting, and engaging for all involved.

## Reference

- [“Brainstorming Works Best if People Scramble for Ideas on their Own.”](#) *Wall Street Journal*. June 13, 2006, page B1.