1-2-4-All Method[1]

Introduction

Use this method with a group of up to 20 to generate ideas and capture insights from all participants and begin the process of aligning around a single idea. This is great for generating shared lists of ideas such as initial brainstorms for Objectives or Key Results, for problem-solving, creating lists of metrics for Weekly Business Reviews, and so on.

For more complex topics like strategies, new product ideas, or plans, you can use the **pre-written ideas variation** if you have a clear enough guide for each person to write their idea in a half-page document.

I've done this with executive teams, and it's enabled the more junior members ideas to be heard even when they are reluctant to speak up in front of the CEO, and it often leads to breakthrough ideas.

You'll need at least 15 minutes, up to an hour or more for complex topics.

Summary

The name 1-2-4-all describes the number of people in each of the four steps, which can be repeated if needed. In the simplest form, it takes about 12-15 mins and looks like this:

1. 1 min: Individual brainstorm.
2. 2 mins: Pair up, share ideas and discuss.
3. 4 mins: Join pairs into foursomes, share ideas and discussion points, and discuss further.
4. 5 mins: Each foursome shares one idea or discussion point that stood out in their conversation with the whole group (repeat as needed)

Repeat this cycle if you want to go deeper. Mix up the pairs each time to stimulate the discussion further.

[1] Based on the 1-2-4-all method from Liberating Structures: https://www.liberatingstructures.com/1-1-2-4-all/

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Meeting Room Setup

Use a meeting room which enables you to move around a little. For a team of eight, a regular meeting room with one table can work as you just form pairs and foursome around the table, but for a larger group you may need a more flexible space where you can have dedicated tables for each foursome.

Virtual Meetings

If you're doing this online, use a video conferencing tool that allows you to have breakout groups. Try to avoid hybrid online/in-person environments – the dynamic doesn't work well.

Pair and Group Selection

Try to mix the groups to maximise discussion. You want the quieter and more junior people to be able to share their ideas in the smallest groups first, paired with someone who has the confidence to speak up with the larger group.

Timekeeping

Allocate someone to keep track of time and use a countdown timer with an audible alarm. The timing is intentionally tight, so discussions feel "unfinished". This keeps the conversation going as the teams move from pairs to foursomes.

Steps

Invitation (in advance)

When inviting them to the meeting, pose a challenge to get them thinking. This could be something like a response to a specific issue, a problem to resolve, or a need to generate a proposal, a strategy, a set of OKRs, or a plan.

Individual Brainstorm (1 minute)

Pose the question or challenge again and allocate 1 minute for individual brainstorming.

Ask them to write ideas down each person to write all their ideas down. Using a single page of note paper or a document per person usually works well. You could also use one idea per Post-It, either physically or spread out on their space on the online collaboration tool you have selected. This is particularly useful if you will use clustering and dot-voting for idea selection and alignment.

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Pairs Discussion (2 mins)

Break into pairs (one pair may need to have three people) and share your ideas.

No need to repeat ideas, just note them as areas of agreement.

Discuss disagreements and the ideas new to either person. Explore any new ideas that come up from the conversation.

Foursome Discussion (4 mins)

Join pairs together into foursomes (you may need a five and/or a six, depending on numbers).

Each pair shares the ideas that came out of their discussion (no need to list all ideas each person had, just those which were of interest to both or surprising to one).

Discuss disagreements and the ideas new to either person. Explore any new ideas that come up from the conversation.

Group Briefing (5 mins)

Each foursome takes it in turn to share one idea or discussion point that they had, without repeating anything other foursomes already said. Repeat around the room while there are more ideas (ask a different person from each foursome to share each time so one person doesn't monopolise).

Pre-Written Ideas Variation

When there are more complex topics, ask participants to write their ideas down in advance as a draft (so they don't over-invest) and limit them to half a page of writing. Do this as meeting preparation rather than during the meeting, so people can manage their own time, as some will take longer than others.

Each part will take longer as there is more to discuss. The pattern is the same, so I'll just run through the changes and refer to the above method.

Summary

1. Preparation: Individual writing.
2. 5 mins: Pair up, share ideas and discuss.
3. 10 mins: Join pairs into foursomes, share ideas and discussion points, and discuss further.

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4. 10 mins: Each foursome shares one idea or discussion point that stood out in their conversation with the whole group (repeat as needed)

Setup

Have everyone bring their laptops or a printout. Have plenty of paper available for taking notes and provide pens.

If you're virtual, make sure people have a way to share their notes with each other – I've seen people using Google Docs, Notion, and even simply sharing their screen with Microsoft Word. If you use something like Miro, set up dedicated work areas on the whiteboard for each individual, pair, and foursome.

Whatever you do, plan how people will share their writings in advance.

Invitation and Preparation (in advance)

As for Invitation above but also ask them to write up to half a page on the topic clarifying their thoughts. I've found it almost essential to give a template or some very specific guidance on the form this should take otherwise the writing varies too much and is too hard to discuss.

It can help to have names on the documents so people can ask clarifying questions, though maintaining anonymity can allow for a safer space to have potentially controversial ideas. Decide based on your team's dynamics and preferences.

Decide how people will share their documents and tell them in advance, so they are ready, and test the technology and everyone's access to it in advance if you are using digital sharing.

Pairs Discussion (5 mins)

Spend the first minute reading each other's documents and asking any clarifying questions. For the remainder, base the conversation on the written documents, but otherwise proceed as for the live brainstorm.

Foursome Discussion (10 mins)

Spend the first two minutes reading the other pair's documents and asking any clarifying questions. For the remainder, base the conversation on the written documents, but otherwise proceed as for the live brainstorm.

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Group Briefing (10 mins)

Each foursome takes it in turn to share one idea or discussion point that they had, without repeating anything other foursomes already said. Repeat around the room while there are more ideas (ask a different person from each foursome to share each time so one person doesn't monopolise).

Optional: Group Discussion

Allocating 10-20 minutes of open discussion at the end can be fruitful if the group is not too large (up to 20 in person, and up to 10 virtually – though your experience may differ) and is able to do so constructively. If you have written documents, give everyone access to them all for reference during this discussion.

Sometimes the group will naturally converge towards a single solution, or perhaps two, and sometimes they will diverge further with new ideas.

Optional: Converging

Sometimes just sharing, discussing, and capturing the ideas is enough. Sometimes you need to converge on a single idea to move forwards. There are many approaches that work, and you can combine them, but three I have used with 1-2-4-all are:

- **Idea clustering and dot-voting** – write ideas on Post-Its, cluster them in groups of related topics on a wall, dot-vote on the favourites. This gives you a list of independent ideas ordered by popularity.
- **Guided discussion** – Leader guides the group towards a conclusion. I've found using a shared screen and document helpful. This provides a balance between more input and control.
- **Leader decides** – Capture the ideas, and leader demonstrates that they have heard and considered all the input, then decides (perhaps live, perhaps afterwards) and then shares with the group.

How you do this depends on how democratic you want to be. Note that management does not need to be democratic – part of the job is to be the decider, and you should only delegate the decision to someone or to a group process if you are willing to be responsible for that decision (or override it if you disagree).

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