

# Nominal Group Technique

## PREREQUISITE TOOLS

None.

## USAGE

### PURPOSE

The Nominal Group Technique (NGT) is a group process for eliciting opinions and aggregating judgments to increase rationality and creativity when faced with an unstructured problem situation.

### USES

NGT may be used to:

- 1) Identify the elements of a problem, especially where there are political, social, and cultural elements.
- 2) Identify and rank goals or priorities.
- 3) Identify experts whose experiences or skills may be useful in other decision-making techniques.
- 4) Involve personnel at all levels in the decision-making process in order to promote the acceptability of the final decision.

### KEY DEFINITIONS

- 1) A *nominal group* is a group process in which the members work independently but in each other's presence.
- 2) An *interacting group* permits discussion between participants (e.g., Brainstorming, BSG, page 3, is an interacting group process).
- 3) *Rank-ordering* is the process of weighing one item against others and then ordering the items by weight on a scale such as importance or priority.

### SHORT DESCRIPTION

The Nominal Group Technique is a structured process which taps the experiences, skills, or feelings of participants. A question is posed to the group. Each member writes down as many responses as possible. The group leader asks each member in turn to state an idea from his or her list and writes it on a flip chart placed before the group. No discussion is permitted until all ideas have been listed. Each item is then briefly discussed in an *interacting group* format. The participants indicate their preference for important items by *rank-ordering*, a process which may be repeated with intervening discussion and argument.

The outcome of the process is the mathematical aggregation of each member's preferences to give the group's ranking of responses to the question.

## ADVANTAGES

- 1) Dominance by high-status, aggressive, or articulate members is reduced since each has an equal opportunity to participate.
- 2) The group remains problem-conscious; and premature evaluation, criticism, or focusing on ideas is avoided.
- 3) The silent generation of ideas minimizes the interruptions in each person's thought processes.
- 4) A written record increases the group's ability to deal with a large number of ideas. It also avoids the loss of ideas.
- 5) Discussion only to clarify items helps eliminate misunderstanding, without reducing the group's efficiency.
- 6) Some studies have shown that, compared to interacting group processes, e.g., Brainstorming (BSG, page 3), the Nominal Group Technique (NGT) enhances the conditions for creativity when generating information on a problem. It avoids rambling discourse and other deficiencies found in group processes.

## LIMITATIONS

- 1) Cross-fertilization of ideas is diminished due to the structure imposed by the NGT.
- 2) The NGT may reduce flexibility, e.g., some group members may feel that the purpose of the meeting or the question posed is irrelevant or misleading, but they have no opportunity to change it.
- 3) Bringing group members together may be cost-prohibitive.

## REQUIRED RESOURCES

### LEVEL OF EFFORT

Some administrative effort is required to determine the purpose of the meeting and to structure the proposed question. Potential group members need to be identified, notified, and assembled.

Source: P. Delp, et al., Systems Tools for Project Planning, PASIRMI, International Development Institute, 201 N. Indiana Ave., Bloomington, Indiana 47405, 1977.

## BENEFITS OF THE STEPS IN THE NOMINAL GROUP TECHNIQUE

### **1. SILENT GENERATION OF IDEAS IN WRITING.**

- 1) Provides adequate time for thinking.
- 2) Facilitates hard work by the model of other group members reflecting and writing.
- 3) Avoids interruption of each other's thinking.
- 4) Avoids premature focusing on single ideas.
- 5) Eliminates dominance by high-status or aggressive members in idea generation.
6. Keeps the group problem-centered.

### **2. Round-robin recording of ideas on a flip pad.**

- 1) Equalizes opportunity to present ideas.
- 2) Assists in separating ideas from personalities.
- 3) Provides a written record and guide:
  - a) Increases group's ability to deal with a larger number of ideas.
  - b) Avoids loss of ideas.
  - c) Confronts the group with an array of clues.
  - d) Encourages hitchhiking.
- 4) Places conflicting ideas briefly and comfortably in front of group.
- 5) Forces the group to fully explore the problem.

### **3. Serial discussion for clarification.**

- 1) Avoids having discussion focus unduly on any particular idea or subset of ideas.
- 2) Helps eliminate misunderstanding.
- 3) Provides opportunity to express the logic behind items.
- 4) Allows members to disagree without argumentation.

### **4. Preliminary vote on item preference.**

- 1) Obtaining independent judgements in writing helps eliminate social pressures.
- 2) Expressing judgements mathematically by rank-ordering or rating increases accuracy of judgements.
- 3) Displaying the array of individual votes clearly highlights areas needing further clarification or discussion.

### **5. Discussion of the preliminary vote.**

- 1) Provides group members a final opportunity to clarify their positions.
- 2) Ensures that "spread" votes really reflected differences of judgement, not unequal information or misunderstanding.

## Figure 12-1 Summary Leadership Guide for Conducting an NGT Meeting

### Design Task

Prepare the NGT Question.

- . Staff clarifies the Problem focus to which clients are to respond.
- . Print the NGT question on work sheets for each participant.

### Preparing the Meeting Room

Table Arrangement.

- . Tables arranged as an open "U" with a flip chart at the open end of the table.
- . Sufficient space between tables to avoid interference.

Supplies.

- . Flip pad for each table and for the leader.
- . Nominal work sheets and pencils for each participant.
- . 3" x 5" cards (for ranking); or voting forms (for rating).
- . Felt pens.

### Introducing the Meeting

Welcoming Statement.

- . Cordial and warm welcome.
- . Statement of the importance of the task - to help planners understand the nature of the clients' contribution.
- . Statement of the use or purpose of the meeting's output.

### Conduct the Nominal Group Process

#### Step 1. Silent Generation of Ideas in Writing

Process:

- . Present the problem identification question to the group in writing.
- . Verbally read the question.
- . Charge the group to write problem characteristics in brief phrases or statements.
- . Ask group members to work silently and independently.

#### Step 2. Round-Robin Recording of Ideas on a Flip Pad.

Process:

- . Record ideas as rapidly as possible.
- . Record ideas in the words used by group members.
- . Make the entire list visible by tearing off completed sheets and taping them with masking tape visible to all group members.

#### Step 3. Serial Discussion for Clarification

Process:

- . Verbally define the purpose of the step.
  - . To clarify the meaning of items
  - . To explain reasons for agreement or disagreement
- . Indicate that final judgments will be expressed by voting so arguments are unnecessary.
- . Pace the group so that all ideas receive sufficient time for clarification.
- . Avoid forcing the member who originally lists the idea to be solely responsible for clarifying the item.

#### Step 4. Preliminary Vote on Problem Importance.

Process:

- . Ask each group to select from the entire list a specific number of priority (important) items.
- . Ask each group member to independently list his priority items on a sheet of paper or card.
- . Ask each group member to independently rank order or rate the selected priority items.
- . Hand in the votes, tally the votes, and record the results on the flip pad in front of the group.

#### Step 5. Discussion of the Preliminary Vote.

Process:

- . Define the role of the step as clarification, not pressure toward artificial consensus.
- . Keep the discussion brief.
- . Caution group members to think carefully about any changes they make in their voting.

#### Step 6. Final Vote.

Process:

(Repeat Step Four)

## THE NOMINAL GROUP

### SUMMARY

In summary, NGT can be used to effectively explore the qualitative nature of problems implicit in quantitative need assessments. It can:

1. Identify and enrich the researcher's understanding of problem attributes by providing judgmental problem identification, refined by priority ranking/ratings.
2. Focus attention on major areas of inquiry, defined by target groups in their own jargon, which may be pursued in greater detail by means of interview or questionnaire instruments.
3. Allow target groups to single out critical problems by means of a group process which is unthreatening and depersonalized.
4. Assist in the development of hypotheses and the formulation of questions for survey and interview field research.
5. Be implemented in a short time period for several different target groups at a low cost.

### NOTES

1. Delbecq, A. L., Van de Ven, A. H., & Gustafson, H. *Group techniques for program planning: A guide to Nominal Group and Delphi processes*. Glenview, Ill: Scott-Foresman, 1973. A complete and explicit guide for professionals dealing with NGT and Delphi Processes, along with a theoretical summary and examples of applications.
2. Delbecq, A. L., & Van de Ven, A. H. Nominal versus interacting group processes for committee decision-making effectiveness. *Academy of Management Journal*, (January) 1971, 14(1). The basic theoretical statement of social psychological theory underlying NGT.
3. Huber, G., & Delbecq, A. L. Guidelines for combining the judgments of individual group members in decision conferences. *Academy of Management Journal*, (June) 1972, 15(2).