

## **Nominal Group Technique**

The Nominal Group Technique (NGT) is a structured process to gather information from a group. The technique was first described in 1975<sup>1</sup> and has since become a widely-used standard to facilitate working groups. The NGT is effective for generating large numbers of creative new ideas and for group priority setting. It is designed to allow every member of the group to express their ideas and to minimize the influence of other participants. Using the NGT, individuals work alone, but in a group setting.

The NGT is a technique for work groups to set goals, identify problems (a component of the needs assessment), create ideas and suggestion to solve problems, or plan programs for an organization. The process is particularly useful with advisory groups to help identify problems or opportunities and to set priorities for extension programming.

The process allows the facilitator to 1) manage the meeting and discussion, 2) keep the group working toward the task at hand, 3) ensure that everyone participates, and 4) set priorities and reach consensus on the goals, problems, solutions, or program suggestions proposed by the group.

### **Appropriate uses for The Nominal Group Technique:**

1. When you want to generate a lot of ideas relevant to some issue.
2. When you want to assure all members participate freely, without influence from other participants.
3. When you want to identify priorities or select a few alternatives for further examination.
4. When there is controversy or uncertainty concerning the nature of an issue or problem and its possible resolution.

### **Steps for conducting NGT activity**

1. Materials and Logistics
  - Meeting room should be large enough to seat participants comfortably at a table, and so that they can all look at one another (tables set in a hollow square are ideal).
  - If break-out sessions will be used, individual break-out rooms are recommended. If not available, the meeting room needs to be large enough that small groups can meet in the corners without distractions from the other groups.
  - Provide easels and flip charts for each group. Provide a sufficient number of dark-colored (so they can be seen across the room) water color-based (so they do not stain hands, clothes or walls) flip chart markers.
  - Provide tape, tacks, or other means to post flip chart sheets on a wall; or use self-adhesive flip chart pads.
  - Provide sticky dots or flip chart pens for participants to record their votes.
  - Provide 3x5 cards (or writing tablets) and pencils for participants.
  - Have refreshments (at least water) available for participants.
2. Introduction: Framing the Question
  - Always begin by having participants introduce themselves. Spending time to meet and greet helps establish a level of trust and comfort among participants.
  - The facilitator triggers the discussion with a key issue or question.
  - The issue or question should be stated in an objective tone and should not give indications of possible or potential solutions.
  - For the purposes of a needs assessment, the issue statement prepares your group to identify major issues, concerns, or problems faced by your clientele or your community, which they feel might be extension priorities.

- One way to set the stage is to present a review of current programs, a look at the current five year State Plan of Work, etc.

### 3. Brainstorming: the “Nominal” Phase

- Participants generate ideas silently, in response to the key question. It is best to ask participants to write their ideas on a sheet of paper or on 3”x5” cards.
- Participants are instructed not to discuss their ideas with each other until the brainstorming session is over; usually about 10-minutes.
- Facilitator asks each participant in turn to share their top response (idea) with the group.
- Ideas are recorded on a Flip Chart or other device that allows all participants to see and read the “group memory” clearly.
- Participants are asked not to repeat responses that have already been listed; instead they should share their next idea.
- Do not combine ideas at this time, record each item separately.
- After each participant has shared their top idea, repeat the process by asking each participant to share their second idea. Continue until all participants have shared all of their ideas with the group.
- No discussion of ideas should occur during the brainstorming activity. Facilitator should explain that ideas are not to be judged or evaluated at this time, and that discussion would take place during the next phase of the process.

### 4. Discussion: the “Clarification” Phase

- Each idea is explained by the participant who presented it.
- Other participants can ask questions that help clarify the idea and the intention of the author.
- Ideas are discussed in turn, in the order they were recorded – not based on popularity, controversy, or any other judgment.
- The facilitator leads a discussion about each of the ideas, ensuring that all participants are invited to share their thoughts, pros and cons, about any given idea.
- The facilitator also keeps the conversation moving forward, avoiding spending too much time on any one issue. The discussion continues until all participants are comfortable with the meaning and intent of each idea.
- If you are dealing with an unmanageable number of ideas, it may be desirable to insert an optional “ranking” step here. To conduct a ranking, have each participant write down on a 3”x5” card their top 10 (or top 5) ideas from the entire list, and then rank them 1-10 (or 1-5) with 10 being highest. Participants can also write their rankings next to the ideas on the flip charts. Compile the ranking numbers and create a refined list of ideas that includes only those original ideas that were ranked on at least one participant’s individual list.
- Some closely-related ideas may be combined during this phase, if both authors agree, and a single idea restated to reflect the combination.

### 5. Decision making: the “Voting” phase

- Group decisions are made through a process of voting or ranking of ideas or alternatives. The process results in a prioritization of the recorded ideas or responses to the original issue or question.
- Before any vote is taken, it is useful to have a discussion with the group about the number of ideas that will be included on the final list. This defuses a potentially awkward situation during the final stage of the process by giving additional information to the participants before they vote.
- Once all discussion has been completed, participants cast their individual votes. Those votes are tallied to make a group decision.
- The authors of the original NGT process describe the voting procedure as a “private” activity. However, others have explained the benefits of a more public voting process, particularly as it relates to improving the long-term acceptance of the results.<sup>ii</sup>
- In the original description, each group member is asked to rank order their top alternatives; with a score of 10 being the most important. This is done by having participants write each idea and its rank

on a 3X5 card. The facilitator collects the cards and records each ranking beside the alternative. The ranks for each alternative are averaged.

- As an alternative, each participant is asked to write their choices first in private on a card or sheet of paper. Then, in an open (public) voting process, participants indicate their choices by placing sticky dots, or by making marks, on flip charts next to the ideas that they prefer.
- The number of votes given to each participant may be small (maybe only 3-4 votes) or may be large (perhaps 100 votes). The number of votes per participant should depend on the absolute number of ideas that are being considered (more ideas=more votes) and on the number of ideas that will be included on the final list of priorities.
- Allowing participants to cast multiple votes increases the likelihood that each participant will support at least one of the ideas on the final list.
- Participants should be instructed how they may cast their votes (all of their votes for a few ideas, or spread across a larger number of ideas).
- If participants are permitted to cast multiple votes for a single idea, then the process allows them to weight their preferences by assigning more votes to their first choice.
- However, allowing all votes to be cast on a single item increases the chances that a participant will fail to see their preference on the final list of priorities. An intermediate solution is to allow participants to cast a large number of votes, but to also require that they vote for a minimum number of ideas.
- After voting has been completed, the final list of ideas is reconfigured in ranked order.
- Each item on the final list is discussed. The final discussion helps participants understand what was accomplished during the session, and to understand what steps are to be taken next.
- In some cases, the list produced may not be representative of the group's wishes. Discussing and asking questions about the final list may reveal that the vote should be repeated.
- The final list becomes a concrete product of the group process.

#### **Tips for Conducting the *Nominal Group Technique* Activity:**

1. If your group is large, some participants may not feel the opportunity or desire to participate. Dividing into smaller groups (5-8 participants each) encourages more active participation.
2. When smaller groups are formed, it is necessary for someone to facilitate the small group, keeping track of progress and leading to a group product. This person can be appointed by the main facilitator or can be selected by the members of the small group.
3. Small groups can be used for any or all three of the phases of the NGT. However, it is important for the small groups to come together after each phase to share with the large group what their small group has accomplished.

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<sup>i</sup> The NGT was originally described by Delbecq, A.L., Van de Ven, A.H. and Gustafson, D.H. 1975. *Group Techniques for Program Planning: A Guide to Nominal Group and Delphi Processes*. Scott, Foresman & Company, Glenview, IL. This treatment, and dozens of others, is adapted from that pioneering work.

<sup>ii</sup> Bartunek, J.M. and J. K Murningham. 1984. The Nominal Group Technique: Expanding the Basic Procedure and Underlying Assumptions. *Group Organization Management* 9:417.