NOMINAL GROUP TECHNIQUE

Nominal Group Technique (NGT) is a structured exercise – an example of a focus group – that establishes clarity among the viewpoints expressed by a discussion group.

NGT was designed some years ago by community developers. In its earliest forms, NGT was a problem-solving exercise in which no verbal communication occurred among participants. Hence, *nominal group* because the NGT group was a group *in name* but not in function.

In its present formats (and variations are numerous) NGT may incorporate both verbal and non-verbal phases.

NGT is a useful activity in various contexts, but it may be most productive as a preliminary data collection method. Information gathered by NGT can become the subject matter of questionnaires, interviews, etc.

The following is but one version of NGT – a version that we sometimes use in the Diploma in Adult Education program.

NGT Process

1. ***Designate the membership of the nominal group***. NGT functions adequately in groups of approximately 6-12 members. The nominal group may be homogeneous (similar in occupations or community interest) or heterogeneous (differing in occupations, etc.).

   NGT respondents are not necessarily acknowledged subject matter experts, but rather are persons/workers/managers, etc. who can be designated as "experts for the moment". Respondents must have more than basic knowledge and/or skills regarding the issues being examined.

   When we (NGT designers/facilitators) are allowed input into the selection of respondents, we should be mindful of the synergy of the exercise. Common and sometimes problematic dynamics to consider are management vs. staff (union or non-union), senior management vs. middle management, one community strata vs. another, the assertive vs. the non-assertive, and so on. In short, we need to be aware of the political implications of the group's composition. It can further the NGT process or inhibit it.

2. ***Compose the nominal question.*** Prior to staging NGT, the designer/facilitator prepares the question to be posed to the group. The question should be open (so that it solicits the respondents' opinions) yet focused (directed at one issue or one set of related issues).

   "What are the knowledge, skills, and attitudes required to be an effective adult educator in a classroom setting?"

   The above style of nominal question will obtain a volume of response that is appropriate for the development of a curriculum (note its completely wide-open context).

   "What skills are required by ICU nurses in order to be more effective in their work during the next six months?"

   The above style of nominal question will elicit a more manageable number of responses (note its more limited context).

3. ***Present the nominal question to the group.*** The well-drafted nominal question requires little, if any, clarification. It is essential that the group gets on-track quickly. Also, the poorly framed nominal question calls into question the facilitator's credibility. The facilitator may post the nominal question on a flipchart or provide worksheets.

4. ***Respondents are directed to reply personally and silently.*** Allow five minutes or less for response, in writing, to the nominal question. A typical instruction is, "Answer the nominal question as many times as possible during the next 3-5 minutes." The facilitator is seeking the respondents' best thoughts, rather than an essay.

5. ***Take-up responses in round-robin fashion.*** The facilitator solicits one item from each respondent, in turn, until all items from all respondents are posted on flipchart. Allow 10-15 minutes. Respondents check-off items on their personal lists if their items are given by another group member. Ideas that crop-up during the round robin are acceptable.

   The facilitator may permit minor clarification of the terminology of items during this phase, but not wholescale discussion.

6. ***Lead a discussion of each posted item.*** This is the most challenging part of the NGT process. The facilitator leads the group in factoring-out each item by posing questions of clarification and interpretation.
   In this way, some posted items are found to contain sub-topics worthy of separate mention. For example, "communication skills" is removed from the posted list and "greets customer", "asks customer probing questions", and "paraphrases customer statements" are added to the bottom of the list.

As well, after discussion, certain items may be deemed to be irrelevant and be deleted (given consent of the group). Allow 45-60 minutes.

Refining the list may lead to personalized debate among respondents. As the facilitator, remember that true consensus is *not* being sought. Instead, respondents must understand the posted items only to the extent necessary for them to vote on the items (in the next phase of NGT).

The group is in search of clarity, not consensus; if an individual insists that an item be retained, allow the item to stand. The group will enforce its views through the next phase (prioritization).

Occasionally, this advisory is useful: "Everyone is encouraged to contribute comments of clarification, and no one should take ownership of any item. During this phase, all items belong to the group and not the individuals who contributed the items."

7. ***Prioritize the posted list.*** The facilitator requests group members to indicate their individual priority of the items generated by the NGT. The prioritizing occurs silently and personally. The facilitator collects these data, and then posts and collates them to show the group's priorities. Allow about 10 minutes.

   a) Rate each item as "must know" or "should know" or "nice to know" – using 3, 2, 1 respectively, or …

   b) Rank order the individual's top 5-7 items, or …

   c) Assign a dollar value to as many or as few items as the respondent wishes. For example, given $1,000 to spend on the "purchase" of training from among the topics on the posted list, advise respondents that they may spend $100-1,000 on a given item or items (provided that the amount is in $100 increments)

Among NGT's benefits are its (relative) efficiency of time, the quality and quantity of information produced, and the support for the particular training program – and the training function generally – that respondents take away from the NGT experience.