Organizational Behavior
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NOMINAL GROUP TECHNIQUE*: A USERS' GUIDE
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This document is designed to identify the circumstances under which use of the Nominal Group Technique (NGT) is appropriate and examine the strengths and weaknesses of the method.

INTRODUCTION

This document and its associated demonstration are designed to teach you the use of the Nominal Group Technique (NGT) for organizational decision making and problem solving. In using the NGT, we are not concerned with routine decisions or decisions in which negotiation or bargaining occurs. Rather, we are concerned with *judgmental* decision making where creative solutions are sought.

The NGT technique will take advantage of pooled judgments. That means that the judgments of a variety of people with varied talents, knowledge, and skills will be used together. By doing this, the resulting ideas are likely to be better than those that might be obtained by other methods.

In this document, we will:

1. Provide a brief overview of NGT.
2. Describe the use of the NGT technique detailing the exact process at each step.
3. Discuss some of the most commonly asked questions about the NGT method.
4. Summarize the NGT method so that you will be ready and able to use it after reading this document and participating in the associated demonstration.

OVERVIEW

Procedures

1. Generating Ideas: Each individual in the group silently generates ideas and writes them down.
2. Recording Ideas: Group members engage in a round-robin feedback session to concisely record each idea.
3. Discussing Ideas: Each recorded idea is then discussed to obtain clarification and evaluation.
4. Voting on Ideas: Individuals vote privately on the priority of ideas, and the group decision is made based on these ratings.

*This exercise is based heavily on the ideas presented in Delbecq, A. L., Van de Ven, A. H., and Gustafson, D. H., *Group Techniques for Program Planning: A Guide to Nominal Group and Delphi Processes*, (1975), Scott, Foresman and Company.

Benefits

1. Balances participation across members.
2. Balances influence of individuals.
3. Produces more creative ideas than interacting groups.
4. Produces a greater number of ideas than do traditional interacting groups.
5. Results in greater satisfaction for participants.
6. Reduces the conforming influence common to most face-to-face group meetings.
7. Encourages participants to confront issues on a problem-solving basis rather than on a

personal assault basis.
8. Leads to greater sense of closure and accomplishment.

Limitations

1. Requires extended advance preparation, which means that it cannot be a spontaneous technique.
2. Tends to be limited to a single-purpose, single-topic meeting; it is difficult to change topics in the middle of the meeting.
3. Needs agreement from all participants to use the same structured method, which some people might resist.

PREPARATORY TASKS

The Meeting Room
Choose a room large enough to accommodate participants in groups of five to nine members at individual tables. Space tables far enough apart so noise from tables does not overlap and prove distracting. It is usually best to set each table in a U-shape, with a flip chart at the open end of the U.

Supplies
Provide the necessary supplies, which means that for each table you will need a flip chart, a roll of masking tape, a pack of 3 x 5 index cards (five cards per person), one large felt-tip pen for marking on flip chart, and paper and pencil for each participant.

Opening Statement
This statement must clarify member roles and group objectives and should include a warm welcome, a statement of the importance of the task, mention of the importance of each member's contribution, and an indication of how the group's output will be used. The following is a sample opening statement:

> I would like to thank each of you for attending this meeting to identify ways to deal with _____ [at this point, a statement would be inserted on whatever the focal problem is]. I welcome you to this meeting and want you to know that I am very happy to have each of you with us today. Our objective is an important one. At the conclusion of this meeting, we will have mapped a potential strategy for dealing with _____ [the focal problem].

> In our meeting, it is important that each of us fully participate. Indeed, success will depend on our equal and full participation. Each of us is here as an important group resource. There are no status differences between us in this particular meeting. Our success depends on every member fully sharing the insight from his or her own work experience perspective. I appreciate, therefore, the willingness of every one of you to fully share your ideas and work intensely during the next 90 minutes we are together. The ideas which you generate in this meeting will become the basis for organizational planning for _____ [the focal problem].

CONDUCTING THE SESSION

Step 1: Silent Generation of Ideas in Writing

The first step of the NGT meeting is to have group members write key ideas silently and independently. This is done to:

Provide:	Avoid:
A. adequate time for thinking and reflection	A. interruptions
B. social facilitation from seeing others	B. an undue focusing on a small number of ideas

working on the same task

C. sufficient time for generation of ideas

D. the benefit of remaining problem-centered

C. competition, status pressures, and conformity pressures

D. choosing between ideas prematurely

To accomplish this step, the leader must:

- Present the question or problem to the group in written form.
- Verbally read the question to the group.
- Direct the group to write ideas in brief phrases or statements.
- Ask the group to work silently and independently.

The following is an example of how the leader might start Step 1 of the NGT process:

> The following is the organizational issue identified for today's session. [The leader would then read the problem statement to the group.] I would like each of you to take five minutes to list your ideas in response to this question. Describe each idea in a brief phrase or a few words on the worksheet in front of you. Please work independently of other members. During this period of independent thinking, I ask that you not talk to other members, interrupt their thinking, or look at their worksheets. Since this is an opportunity for each of us to prepare his or her contributions to the meeting, I would appreciate intense effort during the next five minutes. At the end of the five minutes, I will call time and suggest how we proceed to share our ideas. Are there any questions? Let's proceed then with our individual effort for the next five minutes.

Here are some suggestions for the leader during this first step of the NGT process:

1. Be a model of good behavior by writing your own ideas in silence.
2. Sanction individuals who disrupt the process.
3. Avoid detailed clarification of the task that would suggest solutions.
4. 4. Be a working participant just as any other member.

Step 2: Round-Robin Recording of Ideas

The second step of NGT is to record the ideas of group members on a flip chart visible to the entire group. Round-robin recording means going around the table and asking for one idea from one member at a time. The leader writes the idea of a group member on the flip chart and then proceeds to ask for one idea from the next group member, and so on.

Some of the advantages of this approach include:

- Equal participation in the presentation of ideas.
- An increase in "problem-mindedness."
- Depersonalization (the separation of ideas from personalities).
- An increase in ability to deal with a large number of ideas.
- Tolerance of potentially conflicting ideas.
- Encouragement of hitchhiking. (An idea listed on the chart by one member might cause another member to think of a new idea. When this occurs, the second member should add the new idea to his or her personal worksheet to be presented to the group when his or her turn for presenting an idea arrives.)
- Provides a written record and guide.

To accomplish this step, the leader will behave as outlined in the following statement which should be made by the group leader:

> During the last five minutes, each of us has used our worksheets to list ideas for dealing with today's issues. Now I would like to have each of you share your ideas with the other members of the group. This is an important step

because our list of ideas will constitute a guide for further discussion, help us understand the richness of ideas we have to work with, and stimulate additional ideas. To accomplish this goal as quickly and efficiently as possible, I am going to go around the table and ask individuals, one at a time, to give me one idea from their worksheet, summarized in a brief phrase or a few words. After the entire list is on the board, we will have the opportunity to discuss, clarify and dispute the ideas. If someone else in the group lists an idea which you also had on your worksheet, you need not repeat the idea. If, however, in your judgment the idea on your worksheet contains a different emphasis or variation, we would welcome the idea. Variations on a theme are important and will help us to be creative. [Turning to the first person in the group, the leader now asks:] Would you please give me one idea from your list?

The following are some suggestions for the leader to follow at this stage:

1. Number and record each idea on the flip chart.
2. Allow a person to "pass" if they have no new ideas (but allow them to reenter later, if they wish).
3. Record ideas as rapidly as possible.
4. Record ideas in the exact words of the group member.
5. Make the entire list of ideas visible to the entire group.
6. Allow only a listing of ideas, not a discussion or debate.

Step 3: Serial Discussion

The purpose of the third step of the NGT method is to discuss each idea in turn for the purpose of clarification. Advantages of this step include:

- Avoids focusing unduly on any one idea or subset of ideas.
- Provides an opportunity for clarification and elimination of misunderstanding.
- Provides an opportunity to present the logic behind an idea or disagreement.
- Allows for recording of differences of opinion without undue argumentation.

The leader's responsibilities at this stage are shown in the following example of comments which should be made by the leader:

> Now that we have listed our ideas on the flip chart, I want us to take time to go back and briefly discuss each idea. The purpose of this discussion is to clarify the meaning of each item on our flip chart. It is also the opportunity to express our understanding of the logic behind the idea and the relative importance of the item. We should feel free to express varying points of view or to disagree. We will, however, want to pace ourselves so that each of the items on the chart receives the opportunity for some attention, so I may sometimes ask the group to move on to further items. Finally, let me point out that the creator of the idea being discussed need not feel obliged to clarify or explain an item. Any member of the group can play that role. [Going to the flip chart, the leader points to the first item and says:] "Are there any questions or comments group members would like to make about this first item?" [This is then repeated with each idea.]

Step 4: Preliminary Vote

The purpose of this step is to aggregate the judgments of individual members to determine the relative importance of individual items. The procedure for Step 4 is clearly shown in the directions given by the leader as follows:

- Step 4a

> We have now completed our discussion of the entire list of ideas, have clarified the meaning of each idea, and have discussed the areas of agreement and disagreement. At this time, I would like to have the judgment of each group member concerning the most important ideas on the list. To accomplish this step, you should each take five index cards. I would like you to select the five most important items from our list of items. This will require careful thought and effort on your part. As you look at the flip chart sheets and find an item which you feel is very important, please record the item on an index card.

[At this point, the leader goes to the flip chart and draws an index card.] Please place the number of the item in the upper left-hand corner of the card. For example, if you feel Item 13 is very important to you, you would write 13 in the upper left-hand corner. [At this point, the leader should write 13 in the upper left-hand corner of the card s/he has drawn on the flip chart.] Then, write the identifying words or phrase on the card. [At this point, the leader writes the phrase for Item 13 on the card s/he has drawn.] Do this for each of the five most important items from our total list. When you have completed this task, you should have five cards, each with a separate phrase written on the card and with identifying numbers using the numbering system from our list of ideas on the flip chart. Do not rank-order the cards yet. Spend the next few minutes carefully selecting the five items. We will rank-order the cards together. Are there any questions?

- Step 4b

[After each member of the group has selected five items and written them on separate cards, the leader says the following]: Please spread out your cards in front of you so you can see all five at once. Looking at your set of five cards, decide which one card is the most important. Which card is more important than the other four cards? [At this point the leader gives the group time to study their cards.] Please write a number "5" in the lower right-hand corner of the card. Turn that card over and look at the remaining four cards. Of the remaining four cards, which is the least important? Write a number "1" in the lower right-hand corner. Now choose the most important of the remaining three cards and write the number "4" in the lower right-hand corner. Now choose the less important of the remaining two cards and write the number "2" in the lower right-hand corner. Now write the number "3" in the lower right-hand corner of the remaining card.

- Step 4c

The remaining parts of Step 4 are as follows:
  1. A. The leader makes a tally sheet on the flip chart with numbers down the left-hand side of the chart corresponding to the ideas from the round-robin listing.
  2. B. The leader has all of the cards from all participants placed into one large pile which he or she then shuffles.
  3. C. The leader then asks one group member to read the idea number and number of points from each index card while the leader records the scores on the tally sheet.
  4. D. The leader sums the scores for each of the ideas to identify those ideas which are most highly rated by the group as a whole. These constitute the most favored group actions for dealing with the problem which was the focus of the exercise.

Optional Steps

If desired, two additional steps can be added to the process. *Step 5* adds a brief discussion held after the group sees the ratings of the entire group. This discussion focuses on those ideas that were most highly rated during the preliminary vote and again concentrates on clarification of the issues. After this discussion, the leader proceeds to *Step 6*, in which a new (final) vote is taken. The final vote is then tallied to identify the group's most favored actions.