



NOMINAL GROUP TECHNIQUE (A GROUP CONSENSUS-BUILDING AND RANKING TECHNIQUE)

Purpose

The nominal group technique is used to engage in consensus planning so you can prioritize issues and make decisions.

Needs Assessment Applications

The nominal group technique can be a valuable tool for facilitating group decision making, and it can also be useful for data collection (such as for generating a list of the possible causes of a particular problem). The theorists who originated this technique used the term *nominal* (meaning *in name only*) to express the bringing together of a group that is assembled for the purpose of pooling ideas around a particular issue and ranking those ideas. We can also think of this technique simply as a *group ranking technique*. The technique provides a structured process for working with group members to prioritize their ideas, concerns, or other decision inputs in a format that is both inclusive and consensus-building.

During data collection, for instance, a nominal group technique can help a group of community members as they prioritize their list of public services that are provided by the city and that are inadequately addressing community expectations. This dynamic group decision-making process is flexible enough that you may use it multiple times at different steps within your needs assessment—whenever a group with multiple perspectives has to make a difficult decision.

Advantages and Disadvantages

Advantages

- The nominal group technique is more structured than the ordinary group discussion approach.
- Through a nominal group technique, everyone in the group is given an opportunity to contribute to the discussion and decision, thereby avoiding a situation where one person dominates the group process.
- The nominal group technique can be used with small (3–9 people) groups as well as with larger groups (for example, 10–30 people).
- By using the nominal group technique, you can get a sense of priority concerns that are represented among the group’s members.

Disadvantages

- The synergism that is experienced in more open-ended group discussions may not develop as easily in the nominal group approach.
- The nominal group technique may feel somewhat mechanical to some participants. This situation can be circumvented to some extent by ensuring that the facilitator shows flexibility in process and implementation.
- Although the nominal group technique can be used with a range of group sizes, it is hard to implement the technique effectively with large audiences unless you plan very carefully beforehand.

Process Overview

1. From the list of decisions to be made during your needs assessment, identify those elements that may best be attained through the nominal group technique.
2. Create a facilitator’s guide or protocol to guide the group. In the protocol, ensure that all participants are given multiple opportunities to contribute to group decisions. At the same time, the process must intentionally and continually move the group toward a decision, rather than letting discussions continue without advancing. The guide should offer

the facilitator a fair amount of flexibility to modify the process when the group requires additional information or when subdecisions must be made prior to other decisions.

3. Schedule a time for the group when the highest number of priority participants are available. Verify that you have a group facilitator available at the scheduled time.
4. To begin the exercise, give each group member some paper and a writing implement.
5. Present the session's single topic to the group members. For example, the group members could be presented with a context for why the group is meeting and could be asked to "identify what results you should be accomplishing but are not able to accomplish at this time," "list all of the things that could be improved about . . .," or "list which of the factors causing the performance gap should be our priorities for the next year." Only one key question should, however, be used in a session so that you can maintain a clear focus and objective.
6. Give the group members an opportunity to ask any questions that come to mind or to discuss anything that helps to elucidate the scope and specifics of the topic. In other words, accommodate interaction that will help increase clarity for the discussion.
7. Ask the group members to take time (generally a few minutes) to think about the topic and to write notes for their responses. Encourage group members to write down their thoughts in a bulleted, abbreviated format.
8. On a turn-by-turn basis, ask each group member to share a response with the group. As each group member shares his or her response, write it on a flip chart. Invite the group member to elaborate if necessary, but do not allow other group members to ask questions, challenge, or otherwise discuss the responses (to avoid subtle peer pressure, disagreements, arguments, unwanted embarrassment, and other undesired behaviors or emotions).
9. After all group members have given one response, go around the room again and ask each group member to give a second response, and then a third. Continue this process until all answers have been written on the flip chart sheets. Ask participants to scratch items from their individual lists as those points are added to the flip charts (to avoid duplication). Again, group members should not discuss the responses, but the

facilitator may ask for clarifications to ensure an accurate response is recorded.

10. Hang the flip chart sheets next to one another so all sheets can be seen at the same time by all group members. Assign a letter to each discrete contribution on each flip chart sheet. To facilitate discussion, give each item on the flip charts a unique letter.
11. Give each group member a stack of index cards. Ask each member to identify, for example, the five responses that he or she feels is most important, identifying each response on a separate index card by the letter it has been assigned on the flip chart.
12. Next, ask the group members to rank the five responses they selected in order of priority, from one to five (five being the highest priority and one being the least high priority). They should do this on their index card by writing the rank order value of each response next to the letter for the response. When the group members are done, ask them to reorganize their index cards in alphabetical order.
13. Reading from the flip chart, go through the list of responses in alphabetical order. As you read aloud the letter corresponding with a response, ask each group member to state the rank (if any) that they gave it.
14. Aggregate all the ranks for each response on the flip chart. The responses with the highest aggregated value constitute the top priorities for the group.
15. If necessary, a second or third round of rankings can be done to further reduce the responses and to advance the group toward a decision.

Tips for Success

- Each nominal group session that you conduct should last between 30 minutes and four hours. Each session should present only one key question to the participants.
- Arrange to have the following supplies available at the group meeting site: flip chart, masking tape, markers, paper, index cards, and pens or pencils.
- If you are working with a large group, consider assigning individual participants to smaller groups, with an assigned leader for each group.

References and Resources

Witkin, Belle Ruth, and James W. Altschuld. 1995. *Planning and Conducting Needs Assessments: A Practical Guide*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Websites

“Expressed Satisfaction with the Nominal Group Technique among Change Agents” is available at <http://cogprints.org/4767/01/Gresham.pdf>. (This is a dissertation document; however, the literature review provides interesting and in-depth information on the use of the nominal group technique.)

“Nominal Group Technique” is available at http://syque.com/quality_tools/toolbook/NGT/ngt.htm. (This website includes a worked example of the technique being implemented.)

“Using Nominal Groups” is available at http://ppa.aces.uiuc.edu/pdf_files/NomGroup1.PDF.