

Nominal Group Technique

Nominal Group Technique (NGT) is designed to encourage every member of a group to contribute, and prevents the more vocal group members from dominating the discussion. NGT facilitates discussion, stimulates creative contributions, increases group productivity, uncovers divergent viewpoints, and leaves group members feeling satisfied that they have contributed and that their voices have been heard.

NGT is especially effective when difficult decisions must be made with input from every person, and when discussion has become heated and/or when group members are attempting to influence other members of the group. NGT requires a facilitator. A step-by-step process to implement NGT follows. If the group is small (15 or fewer members), the steps can be accomplished working as a whole. If the group is large (more than 15 or so), you may find it easier to organize members into groups of six or eight and let these small groups work together. In step 3, for example, each *table* would take a turn contributing an idea.

Step 1. Developing and Stating the Question

Working with the group members or sponsors, the facilitator develops and then articulates the question. The group must agree that this question, as stated, is the best start for the discussion. Usually, the question takes the form of a “how” question, such as, “How could we redesign our committee structure to better achieve our objectives?” The question is provided in written form for all to see. The facilitator reads the question to make sure each person understands the question.

Step 2. Working Alone

The facilitator instructs each person to work silently and independently for five minutes, jotting down as many ideas, thoughts, or answers as possible on paper. After five minutes, the facilitator calls “time.”

Step 3. Gathering Ideas

Using a flip chart or overhead which is visible to the entire group, the facilitator records ideas, thoughts, and answers. Each person provides one idea at a time, as the facilitator directs each person, in turn, to respond or “pass” if they already see all their ideas recorded. Participants may ask permission from the group to revise an earlier contribution, or develop new ideas for their own list. Use only a few words to describe each idea, using the author’s own words. No evaluation of ideas is allowed at this time. Continue to record ideas until no one has another.

Step 4. Discuss and Clarify Ideas

The facilitator leads the group in discussion of each idea, one by one, to clarify each idea, add to it if possible, or meld it with another idea. No arguments about the merits, validity, or worth of any idea is allowed at this point! If group members begin to lobby for one point or another, the facilitator can remind them that preferences can be expressed in the next step. The final product of Step 4 is a clear and concise list of ideas, posted for all to see. The facilitator may give the group a restroom or refreshment break while he/she creates a neater compiled list, if necessary.

Step 5. Developing Priorities

Using the compiled list generated in Step 4, the facilitator asks the group to list five to eight top priority ideas, in order of importance, write them down and turn them in. If the group didn’t take a break after step 4, now would be a good time to give a break. If the group is large, this step can be streamlined if each participant is given a limited number of sticky dots (five to eight sticky dots, for example) to post on his/her “high priority” idea(s). Limit the high priority list to no more than eight items, since people can become confused trying to rank more than eight items.

Criteria for setting priorities can vary, or you may allow the group to develop several categories of priority. For example, you might ask group members to identify “the most important action item for the coming month” or “the biggest bang for our buck” effort, or “the best long-term strategy.”

Step 6. Counting Votes

The facilitator counts up the number of votes for each idea. Some facilitators use weighted votes, with the “number 1” votes having more points than the “number 5” votes, but that may be unnecessary to indicate the five high-priority ideas. If your group voted with sticky dots, counting the number of dots on or near each idea will indicate the high priority ideas.

To facilitate voting in a large group, the facilitator could ask for the “top five” ideas from each table, creating a condensed list of high priority ideas. From that list, each person could list his or her “top five” ideas, or use voting or the sticky dot method to identify the top five from the condensed list. The facilitator may lead discussion about how the votes developed, including wide ranges that seem inconsistent. If there were errors in understanding the process or the definitions of ideas, this discussion may clarify these and allow persons to reassess their votes. You might find it useful to take another vote if people have changed their minds. Voting again doesn’t impair the process.

Step 7. Next Steps

Discussing the implications of the results and developing next steps provide closure to the Nominal Group Technique.

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