NOMINAL GROUP TECHNIQUE

I. Goals/Outcomes

1. To tap the thinking and resources of all attending group members
2. To level the playing field
3. To discover alternative solutions to a problem or issue

II. Background/Context

The Nominal Group Technique (NGT) has been around for a long time and is best used with small groups (4-10 participants). It enables a facilitator to tap the resources of all group members in a meeting. Too often, meetings are dominated by a couple of people. This technique neutralizes the impact and influence of these individuals while incorporating the ideas of all participants.

In any meeting, a facilitator has to be conscious of several things: some individuals can be easily intimidated by others; often the same people dominate a discussion; the pace and complexity of the discussion can be fast or overwhelming for some people; quiet and shy individuals can find it challenging to fully participate; and often there is disparity of power in a group. When you put top leaders in a work group with people who are several levels below them, there needs to be a way to level the playing field.

What is great about NGT is that it manages all of the stated challenges facing a facilitator and produces a prioritized set of ideas, solutions, or recommendations. There are usually seven steps with the NGT. We have changed the traditional scoring method (i.e., low numbers = high priority idea) by reversing the value of numbers. A higher number in our version means the idea or suggestion is of higher value. We have found that it is easier to score, and makes more sense to people.

III. When to Use

1. When you want equal participation from all group members
2. When the topic being discussed is a sensitive or controversial issue
3. When there are many good alternatives to a problem or issue
4. When there are different levels of power in the group
IV. Logistics

Materials: Index cards, flipchart paper, easels, magic markers, pens, and pencils
Space needs: Room large enough for participants to move about freely
Time frame: Approximately one hour
Number of participants: 4-10 participants

V. Implementation

We will use the same example throughout all seven steps.

Step #1: Define the problem to be solved or the decision to be made. This is obviously very important and central to the success of this technique.

Example: "What are some ways we can improve the level of trust between our administrators and faculty?"

Step #2: Have participants silently generate some ideas and suggestions that will effectively deal with the focus question. Each group member should take about 5-10 minutes and write down their suggestions on an index card. (Limit one suggestion per card.)

Step #3: Record the ideas.

The facilitator should use a round robin approach, where one person at a time provides one of their ideas. The facilitator should record the ideas on a flipchart, in full view of everyone. Make as many rounds as necessary until each person has shared all of their ideas. The facilitator should not duplicate ideas on the list, but note with a checkmark (√) when more than one person has the same idea. At this time your list may look like this:

A. Have the former president facilitate a meeting between administrators and faculty √
B. Do a climate survey
C. Have the president meet with the faculty senate
D. Have top leaders on both sides participate in a team building retreat
E. Create a more open decision-making process
F. Share the budget with faculty members ✓✓
G. Do a study on the equity of faculty salaries
H. Create and implement a questionnaire that will get at the core issues involved. Use good data.
I. Have the Smith Consulting Group come in and diagnose our trust level and issues
J. Find out how other campuses have dealt with this problem

Step #4: Clarify each idea on the generated list.
The purpose of this step is to ensure that everyone understands the suggestions, not whether there are good or bad ideas on the list. There is no judgment or feedback involved with this step.

Step #5: Rank items and list the rankings.
Assign a letter to each suggestion or idea on the flipchart. (We have already done this in our example.) Have each group member write down the letters corresponding to those listed on the flipchart.
Ask each member to vote silently for the ideas. They should assign a high number to the very best idea and a low number to the least effective idea. (Remember, this is a reverse of the traditional scoring system.)

When you have a long list of ideas or recommendations, it is helpful if you suggest that the group only evaluate half of the ideas. (In our example of 10 ideas, you would only evaluate five.) This helps make the process more manageable but group members have to agree to this. If one or two members want to evaluate all the ideas, then don't push and have the group evaluate all of them. (We are going to assume that participants were o.k. with our suggestion and will only rank the top five ideas. An individual voting list might look like this:

\[A = 2\]
\[B = X\]
\[C = X\]
\[D = X\]
\[E = 1\]
\[F = 5\]
\[G = 3\]
\[H = 4\]
\[I = X\]
\[J = X\]

Step #6: Tally the rankings.

In this step, each member calls out their rankings and the facilitator lists them on the flipchart in full view. Add up each idea line (A, B, C, etc.) horizontally. The items with the highest totals indicate the group's preferences. Your list might look like this:

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<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>E</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>G</th>
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<th>I</th>
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</tbody>
</table>

\[A = 17\]
\[B = 7\]
\[C = 3\]
\[D = 3\]
\[E = 11\]
\[F = 5\]
\[G = 8\]
\[H = 6\]
\[I = 2\]
\[J = 14\]

**Helpful Hint**

Do not allow for any discussion time when the ideas are being generated, recorded, or prioritized. Remember the main purpose of this meeting is to solicit ideas and determine priorities. It is not about debating the pros and cons of the suggested ideas.
Step #7: Wrap things up.

In our example, ideas A, J, and E got the highest votes. The priority suggestions should be seriously considered for implementation. It would be helpful to have an open discussion about practical next steps for operationalizing these suggestions and assigning responsibility for them. Keep this discussion to 15–30 minutes.