

Nominal Group Technique

By Charlie Pellerin

Personally, I love to use Nominal Group Technique (“NGT”)¹ for brainstorming tough problems. I recall the Japanese expression, “You Americans are one-person thinking companies. We Japanese are many-person thinking companies. Over time we will always win.” Well, perhaps not, but the expression carries an important message.

Process Overview

This is how I recommend you do this. Begin by getting unanimous (verbal) agreement from the attendees on the following:

1. They permit me to facilitate the event;
2. People will fully participate, e.g. no PDAs or computers permitted;
3. Breaks of 10 minutes every hour to check e-mail;
4. Abide by the usual rules of NGT, i.e. *no discussions of the merit of suggestions during the brainstorming process.*

Next, state the mutually agreed inquiry, usually in the form of a question. It is extremely important to:

1. Phrase the inquiry very carefully. The exact wording will drive the entire process. There is a big difference in results between, “How can we create competitive advantage?” and “What discriminators can we use to create competitive advantage?” Notice the difference in “How can we reduce the cost of project X?” and “What innovations could reduce the cost of project X by \$25M?”
2. Don’t move forward until (nearly) everyone agrees. While this discussion should not go on for more than about 30 minutes, max, it should not be rushed either.

The next phase is expansion, or “cast the net broadly.” Give each person a 3 X 5 card and ask them to write at their ideas that address the question. Suggest that they might each write three suggestions. Ask the participants to remain silent until everyone finishes providing a quiet space for thinking. Enforce this softly.

Next, select a person to read one item. Record it on a flip chart rewording, with their permission, if you can enhance the clarity. Leave several inches on the left as space for voting which come later. You then ask the person whether you “have it right?” then move to the next person in physical sequence. Note that “pass” is an acceptable response. Stick with the geometry and cycle through the people until everyone passes. Do not go out of this sequence even if most pass. People who have passed many times often suddenly think of something new — stimulated by what they are hearing from others. When everyone passes, it’s time for the contraction phase.

¹ Delbecq, Van de Ven and Gustafson originally developed this as an organizational planning technique in 1971. The name is because it is only “nominally” a group, since individuals provide the rankings.

State the new question as “Which of these items recorded on the flip chart are most important to you?” Then give each person about half as many votes as the number of items recorded on the flipchart. Ask them to record their votes as vertical lines that each fifth vote groups with a diagonal. This makes it easy to count the votes. I don’t place any restrictions on how people vote. They can place all their votes on a single item if they want to make that statement. The votes aren’t binding anyway. I love this voting process. *People often do not vote for items that they argued vigorously for earlier.*

When the voting completes, draw circles around the highest scores and invite the group to discuss the results. People will notice that some are similar and will want to group them. Anything’s OK at this point. Provide the flip charts to the “management” so they can get the results typed and distributed to all participants. Actions should follow.

You can read about NGT in lots of places (Just Google on it) and see how other people do this.

Topics with High Emotional investment

During my first year in the University of Colorado Business School, I became aware of a long feud between professors about whether “tourism” should be a major, or not. The Dean was weary of this argument and called a special, all-day faculty meeting on a Saturday. I asked him what he planned to and he said, “I have no idea.” I then asked, “Why not let me facilitate the meeting?” To my complete amazement, he said, “OK, go ahead.” He barely knew me as I had only been there a few months.

When I was NASA’s ADA—Strategy, a consultant taught me something important which I now brought to bear. When people argue about matters they care passionately about, they fail to reach resolution because they are really arguing about the unstated criteria in play. So, when the faculty gathered, I used the process described above to first address the question, “What are the criteria for a good major in the business school?” Within an hour or so, we had a list of about 10 prioritized criteria like lifelong learning, good professional opportunities, good wages, intellectually satisfying, and the like.

I then copied the criteria on the left hand side of a whiteboard in the order of number of votes each received with the higher scores on the top. I then said, let’s pick a major and score it with respect to each criterion on a scale of 1 to 10. I suggested we do accounting first and the group had little difficulty doing the scoring. When there was disagreement, I wrote the range as in “5 to 8” points. It was soon obvious to all that this was an excellent choice of a major for those so inclined.

I then said, “OK, let’s now do tourism.” About halfway through the process, it became obvious to all, even the staunch multi-year advocate that tourism failed against the criteria. He stood and said to the group, “I now see that I have been wrong all these years. I let business interests fool me into thinking that something was good for our

students, when it was not. This matter is finished.” We completed the work in time to eat lunch and leave.

When the matter is controversial, use NGT to define and prioritize the criteria that underlie the issue first.