



# COOPERATIVE EXTENSION

*Bringing the University to You*

Fact Sheet 03-21

## Nominal Group Technique (NGT)

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Groups often struggle to find collaborative and structured processes for generating ideas and solutions to organizational and community issues. This fact sheet describes the Nominal Group Technique (Moore 1990), as a process that can be used by groups when engaged in planning and problem-solving.

**What is NGT?** It is a technique that has been used for over 30 years in community planning processes that require active participation (Moore 1990). NGT is often used for generating ideas, identifying issues and potential solutions, and promoting consensus. NGT focuses group discussion around one question; therefore, a specific question presented to a group usually results in more useful responses.

**When should you use NGT?** It is an excellent technique for encouraging the active participation of all group members in answering a question. For example, it can be employed when a group is uncertain about an agreed-upon solution to a complex community or organizational problem, or when disagreement about an issue exists among group participants. This technique can help a group clarify a problem or issue. NGT works best with small groups of five to 10 participants; however, larger groups can also employ this technique.

### What are the process steps that should be followed when using NGT?

1. Select a facilitator (member or non-group member), who serves as a “neutral” when conducting a discussion using NGT.
2. The facilitator introduces a list of suggested ground rules (or “conversation principles”) to be followed. Following a discussion of the ground rules, participants are asked to honor them. Two important rules or principles include: (a) all ideas count, even the “crazy” ones and (b) “arguments” are not allowed.
3. Distribute small pieces of paper or index cards to all group participants. Make sure each participant has five to 10 cards. The facilitator states the issue or problem as one question. For example, “*In what ways can the community benefit in the next five years by developing a new regional water plan?*” Write the question on a flip chart or wallboard.
4. Participants write their responses on cards, working silently and independently. There should be only one idea per card. Allow 4 to 6 minutes maximum for this task.

5. Collect and randomly re-distribute participant's written responses. If a participant receives their own card back, they should not share this information with the group. Rather, the assumption is no one knows who the actual author is of the idea.
6. Participants take turns reading one card per person at a time. Ideas are recorded on a wallboard, flipchart, or *sticky wall*, (for more information on a sticky wall, please refer to Resources, below). Participants are reminded that this is not the time to evaluate ideas and responses. If an idea is not understood, the facilitator asks anyone in the group to speculate what the author meant, allowing for author anonymity.
7. The facilitator continues recording ideas until all cards have been discussed.
8. The facilitator asks the group to identify those ideas that are "very similar" to one another and asks the group for permission to eliminate duplicates. The facilitator assigns each idea a letter of the alphabet. If there are more ideas than letters of the alphabet, assign double letters, such as AA, BB, etc.
9. The facilitator now asks participants to identify their top five preferences. Two methods for prioritizing ideas include the use of dots or 3x5 cards. For example, five large dots of the same color are given to each participant who writes on the dot the letter assigned to the idea posted, corresponding to his or her top five priorities. Dots are collected and affixed to the idea voted on.  
Another method uses cards. Similar to the dot technique, participants determine five of their most important ideas by placing a letter corresponding to the selected idea in the center of the card. The facilitator asks participants to rank-order their five top ideas by writing in the upper right hand corner of the card, a number from five to one. Five is the highest priority, one being lowest priority. Cards are then collected

and the scores are recorded, tabulated, posted and discussed by the group.

10. From the results of the prioritization exercise, the facilitator might ask the group what next steps would they like to take regarding the results? Some suggestions the facilitator could consider as a path for helping the group discuss next steps might include:

- *Do the ideas add clarity to the issue, creating a better understanding of group members' opinions?*
- *Do the top five ideas lend themselves to a plan of action or strategies for the group?*
- *What would the group like to do with this information?*

### **Resources**

- Bens, Ingrid. 2000. Facilitating with Ease! San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Publishers, San Francisco, CA.
- Havergal, Maggie & Edmonstone, John. 2001. The Facilitator's Toolkit. England, UK: Gower Publishing, Ltd..
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- Moore, Carl M. 1990. Group Techniques for Idea Building. Applied Social Research Methods Series. Newbury Park, CA. Sage Publications Volume 9.
- Schwartz, Roger. 1994. The Skilled Facilitator. Jossey-Bass Publishers, San Francisco, CA.
- Technology of Participation (ToP): *Sticky Wall*. The Institute of Cultural Affairs, Phoenix, AZ. [http:// www.ica-usa.org](http://www.ica-usa.org)
- Vrooman, Rona. 1997. Group Process Tools. Info-line. Alexandria, VA. American Society for Training and Development. Issue Number 9407.