Nominal Group Technique

Purpose
The nominal group technique is used to engage in consensus planning for the purpose of prioritizing issues.

Needs Assessment Applications
When collecting data for a needs assessment, prioritizing needs, or making recommendations for action based on needs assessment findings, the nominal group technique can be a valuable tool for facilitating group decision-making. This technique provides a structured process for working with group members to prioritize their ideas, concerns, or other inputs to the decision in a format that is both inclusive and consensus-building. During data collection, for instance, you can use a nominal group technique to help a unit or department identify priority performance measures or perspectives on difficult to measure indicators of results. Similarly, when making recommendations based on needs assessment findings you can use the nominal group technique to facilitate the prioritization of needs (i.e., gaps in results) in order to determine which order they should be addressed through associated performance interventions. This dynamic group decision-making process is flexible enough that you may use 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 traditional focus group approach.
- Through a nominal group technique everyone in the group is given an opportunity to contribute to the discussion, while avoiding the likelihood of one person dominating the group process.
- The nominal group technique can be used with small groups as well as with a larger number of participants.
- You can get a sense of priority concerns represented among the members of the group by using the nominal group technique.

Disadvantages
- The synergism that is experienced in more open-ended focus groups may not develop as easily in the nominal group approach.
The nominal group technique may feel somewhat mechanical to some participants. This can be circumvented to some extent by ensuring that the facilitator shows flexibility in process and implementation.

While there is a range of group sizes with which the nominal group technique can be used, it is hard to implement it effectively with large audiences unless very carefully planned beforehand.

**General Procedures**

1. From the list of information required for the needs assessment, identify those elements that may best be attained through the nominal focus group technique.
2. Create a facilitator’s guide or protocol to guide the nominal focus group. In the protocol ensure that required information regarding both the current results and the desired results of the needs assessment are represented, along with the required information at each level of the program/project results chain.
3. Schedule at time for the focus group when the highest priority participants are all available. Verify that you have a focus group facilitator available at the scheduled time.
4. To begin the nominal focus group, give each group member some paper and a writing implement.
5. Present the single topic for the session to the group members. For example, the group members could be presented with a context for why the group is meeting, and asked to “identify what results you should be accomplishing but are not able to at this time”, "list all of the things that could be improved about..." or to "think of all the things that could be causing...". Only one key question should, however, be used in a session in order to 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 some time (generally a few minutes) to think about the topic and to write down some 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 take some time to share one of their responses with the group. As each group member shares his/her response, write it down on a flip chart. Invite the group member to elaborate if appropriate.
9. Once all group members have given one response, go around the room again and ask each group member to given a second, and then a third response. Continue this process until all answers have been written on the flipchart sheets. Ask participants to scratch items from their individual lists as they are added to the flipcharts (to avoid duplication).
10. Hang up the flipchart sheets next to each other, so that all of them can be seen at the same time, and by all group members. Assign a letter to each discrete contribution on the flipchart sheets. Each item on the flipcharts should have a unique letter, to facilitate discussion.
11. Give each group member a stack of index cards. Ask each group member to identify, for example, the five responses that they feel are most important, identifying each response on a separate index card by the letter it has been assigned on the flipchart.

12. Next, ask the group members to rank order 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 by writing the rank order value of each response next to the letter for the response on their index card. When done, ask the group members to reorganize their index cards in alphabetical order.

13. Reading from the flipchart, read through the list of responses in alphabetical order. As you read out 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. Those responses with the highest aggregated value constitute the top priorities for the group.

15. If necessary, a second round of rankings can be done to further reduce the responses to a group decision.

**TIPS FOR SUCCESS**

- Each nominal group session that you conduct should last between 30 minutes and four hours. Each session should deal with only one key question presented to the participants.
- Arrange to have the following supplies available at the group meeting site: Flip chart, masking tape, markers, paper, index cards, pens/pencils
- If you are working with a larger group, you can assign individual participants to smaller groups, assigning each group a leader.

**REFERENCES AND RESOURCES**


**WEB SITES**

Using Nominal Groups:
http://ppa.aces.uiuc.edu/pdf_files/NomGroup1.PDF

The Nominal Group Technique
http://syque.com/quality_tools/toolbook/NGT/ngt.htm
(This web site from Quality Tools includes a worked example of the technique being implemented).

Expressed Satisfaction with the Nominal Group Technique among Change Agents:
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).