

Needs Assessment Techniques

Using Nominal Groups

Although there are some variations of the nominal group technique, there is a basic form. Nominal group technique uses a highly structured group meeting that asks group members to respond to a question in writing. Responses are gathered one at a time from participants and written on a flipchart. This is repeated until all responses have been gathered. Time is allowed for all responses to be clarified. Participants then rank order the responses.



Nominal groups are **not** recommended for meetings to provide routine information, or meetings called to coordinate or negotiate. It is, however, a useful process when there are difficulties in identifying or prioritizing needs, or identifying/evaluating options.

Nominal group technique can be used with other techniques as part of a comprehensive needs assessment. One could use a survey, interview a few key informants, and conduct a nominal group. If the results of all three studies were similar, recommendations could then be made with greater confidence.



Nominal group technique can also be combined with other techniques. For example, it can be used as a community forum, or the participants can be key informants, stakeholders, or the target audience. It is particularly helpful when you want to get information from a variety of people.



Each 1 1/2 to 3 hour meeting should deal with only one question, such as, What are the major issues facing this community? If the group is being asked to also make suggestions about meeting needs, then that aspect should be covered in a second meeting.

The standard form of nominal group technique has some limitations:

- The process can be time-consuming.
- The generation of ideas is limited to the actual time spent at the meeting.
- The lack of anonymous authorship can make participants play it safe.
- Ideas may be evaluated on their source, rather than on their merit.
- The size of the group is usually limited to nine participants.



These limitations can be overcome by using a modified, or improved version of the process, which asks participants to submit their responses before the meeting. These cards are put together on a list, copied, and distributed to the participants. The list is brought to the meeting and the process is continued from that point.

Like any needs assessment technique, nominal group has some advantages and disadvantages:

ADVANTAGES	DISADVANTAGES
If well-organized in advance, a heterogeneous group can move toward definite group conclusions; the ideas belong to the entire group.	May be extremely difficult to implement with large audiences unless advance preparation has taken place to train group facilitators and divide participants into groups of 6-10 members.
Can be used to expand the information obtained from other sources, or can be used to generate a more specific survey.	May not be a sufficient source of data in itself; may require follow-up survey, observations, or documentary analysis.
Generates many ideas in a short period of time; allows for a full range of individual thoughts and concerns.	May be some overlap of ideas due to unclear wording or inadequate group discussion.
Motivates all participants to get involved because they sense they are personally affected; can have political benefits.	Can give participants a taste of power that cannot be acted on.
Obtains input from people of different backgrounds, experiences, and ages--taps into expertise that might otherwise not be used.	Knowledgeable individuals selected to participate may not represent all community subgroups.
Gives all participants an equal opportunity to express opinions and ideas in a non-threatening setting. Separates generation of ideas from evaluation of ideas.	Assertive personalities may dominate unless leadership skills are exercised.
Gives citizens a voice in community affairs, an opportunity to participate in and contribute to the community.	
Stimulates creative thinking and effective dialogue,	Inappropriate technique for routine meetings, bargaining, negotiation, or coordination.
Allows for clarification of ideas; can be a sounding board	Requires a skilled leader, and can be time-consuming.
Identifies priorities on problem issues.	Process may appear rigid if group leader does not show flexibility--encourage agenda building, and show respect for all ideas and concerns.

If you have been asked to lead a nominal group, there are several basic things you need to know and do. You will need a flipchart of newsprint, or large pieces of newsprint taped to the wall or blackboard, magic markers, and 3 x 5 cards.

In larger meetings, such as a community forum, the participants are divided into several smaller groups, each with a leader. Whether you are the overall leader or the leader of a small group your role is to facilitate. You are to help the participants contribute their ideas. For this exercise your own ideas should be left at home. Sometimes that is difficult to do. Your own ideas can sneak in before you know it. For example, if the purpose of your group is to assess community needs for children, one of the participants may ask for clarification by saying, "Do you mean day care needs?" If you respond by saying, "Sure, that could be one need" you will have led the group to focus on day care needs.

Valuable information may be lost because you gave public approval to discussing day care needs. You need to simply say, "Write down any need that comes to your mind." That way you have not influenced their thinking.

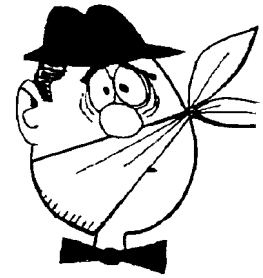
Some other guidelines are:

Avoid providing needs, or hints of needs.

Have the need assessment question in writing, up at the front.

Model good group behavior by writing in silence.

May need to remind participants to work quietly until all are finished.



Standard Nominal Group Technique (more specific details can be found in Brademas)

Orientation (5 minutes): Group leader welcomes participants and explains what each will be doing during the meeting. Leader also explains how the information gathered in the meeting will be used, and stresses the importance of everyone's contribution.

Written individual responses (15 min): Leader reads the written needs assessment question that has been posted. Participants are asked to write each idea on a 3 x 5 card in brief phrases or statements, working silently and independently.

Individual feedback (transcriber/recorder uses newsprint on flipchart at the front): Each participant gives the leader one card with one idea, with no discussion. The transcriber (or the leader) numbers each idea and writes it on the flipchart or newsprint. If a new idea occurs to participants they may write it on a card and turn in to the leader as part of the regular process. This continues until all items have been written down, and there are no new ideas.

Group discussion of feedback (15 min.): The leader points to the first idea, reads it out loud, and asks the group if there are any questions, statements of clarification, or statements of agreement or disagreement anyone would like to make. The object of this is to clarify, not persuade. Duplicates can be eliminated. If new ideas occur to someone, they can be added to the list. The leader makes sure this entire process is done quickly so all items can be discussed.

Voting (15 min.): Leader distributes 3 x 5 cards to each participant who selects from the master list on the flipchart five items he or she feels are most important. The item is put on a card with the number given it in the master list. Then the participant ranks these five items in order of their importance to him, and puts that number in the bottom right hand corner and circles or underlines so everyone knows this is the ranking number, not the number of the item in the master list.

Vote tally (5 min.): Leader collects all the cards. The transcriber uses a tally sheet to record and tabulate results. Recorder shares results with group.

Group discussion (10 min.): Discussion to clarify any questions. Members may change votes.

Plenary session feedback (1 hr and 20 mm): All the small groups convene in one setting. Final votes from each group are reported to the entire audience. Discussion.

Improved Nominal Group Variation (Fox, 1989)

This version of the nominal group takes less meeting time, eliminates the one-idea-at-a-time transcription bottleneck, gives participants more time to consult resources outside the group, provides greater anonymity of ideas, and allows a larger group.

Pre-meeting activity (several weeks before meeting): Communicate purpose of the meeting to **participants** in advance, requesting that they submit their ideas, anonymously on **3 x 5** cards to a conveniently placed box by a certain time. If you have them mail them in, be sure to schedule enough time.

After the deadline, number and list, without change, each idea submitted. Duplicate the list and distribute it to participants with the following instructions:

Please jot down and take to the meeting any proposa/s you want to make for changing the wording of any item, or for combining any items on this list. Do not forget to take this list to the meeting. Also write on 3 x 5 cards any additional items you want to input, anonymously, at the beginning of the meeting.

Individual feedback: When everyone has gathered at the meeting, announce:

Everyone please put a turned-over card in the center of the table for me to pick up. If you haven't a card with an idea on it right now, submit a turned-over blank one. This will assure everyone's anonymity.

The leader mixes up the cards, sorts out the blank ones for re-use, and hands them to transcribers to put on flipcharts. (Several flipcharts and transcribers can be used. Flipchart A would number its suggestions A1, A2, A3, etc.)

The leader then announces a five to ten-minute silent writing period so that participants may prepare more cards for another card collection round, and says:

See if the items going up on display suggestion additional ones to you. You can put as many items as you wish on one card; just try to be terse and specific. Remember, don't identify yourself.

The leader continues to conduct periodic card collection rounds until all of the turned-over cards are blank.

Group discussion of feedback: The group discusses, one by one, the items on display, as in the standard nominal group technique described above.

Continue with the standard nominal group technique

Information taken from: Fox (1989). The improved Nominal Group Technique (INGT). *Journal of Management Development*, 8, 20-27; Brademas (1988). *Nominal group technique: Revitalizing Illinois Communities*; Butler & Howell (1980). *Coping with growth: Community needs assessment techniques*. Corvallis, OR: Western Rural Development Center; Moore, Carl M. (1987). *Group techniques for idea building*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.