



Using the Nominal Group Technique

What is NGT? NGT is a technique that has been used for over 30 years in community-planning processes that require active participation. 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 active participation of all group members in answering a question. For example, NGT can be employed when a group is uncertain about an agreed-upon solution to a complex community/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 5-10 participants. However, larger groups can also employ this technique.

WHAT PROCESS STEPS SHOULD BE FOLLOWED WHEN USING NGT?

- 1 | Select a facilitator (member or non-group member) who serves as a “neutral” person when conducting a discussion using NGT.
- 2 | The facilitator introduces a list of suggested ground rules (“conversation principles”) to be followed. After discussing 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 5-10 index cards to each group participant. The facilitator states the issue or problem as one question. (For example, “In what ways can the community benefit in the next 5 years by developing a new regional water plan?”) The question is written 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 4-6 minutes maximum for this task.
- 5 | Collect and randomly re-distribute the 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 are the authors of the ideas.
- 6 | Participants take turns reading one card aloud at a time. Ideas are recorded on a wallboard, flip-chart, or sticky wall. Participants are reminded 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, CC, etc.
- 9 | The facilitator now asks participants to identify their top 5 preferences. Two methods for prioritizing ideas include the use of dots, Post-it notes, or 3x5 cards. For example, 5 large dots/cards of the same color are given to each participant. The participants write a letter on each dot/card that corresponds to his or her top 5 priorities. Dots/cards are collected and affixed next to the idea. Another method uses cards. Similar to the dot technique, participants determine 5 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 5 top ideas by writing in the upper right hand corner of the card a number from 5 to 1 (5 = highest priority, 1= lowest priority). Cards are 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.



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