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The Effective Use of Committees and Task Forces  
in Retrenchment Planning

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Retrenchment Papers

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FORWARD

The following paper was developed under a grant from the Office of Field Services of the Legal Services Corporation.

They represent the views of their authors only and in no way should be construed as OFS policy. Their aim is to help programs think through the many difficult issues presented by the current threats to Legal Services and to develop effective plans. The papers are based on many interviews and work with local programs as well as derived from the wider literature on retrenchment planning. Given the press of time, we have chosen to make them available in initial drafts. We would appreciate criticism and alternative formulations on these issues and if appropriate will include feedback in subsequent papers or revised drafts. Please send any comments to

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## Introduction

Because of the complexity and importance of the issues in retrenchment planning, effective and broad consultation is critical to the development of a creative plan that can gain the acceptance of the program and board. The following paper addresses some of the issues on the creation, staffing, and use of the committees and sets forth some of the alternatives from which a program can choose options that fit with their local circumstances. There is no one best or right way. What works for one program may not for another. It depends on fitting a strategy to the particular cast of characters in light of the coalitions and the history of working relationships between staff and board, management and staff, and others.

## Creation of Committees

The first decision is whether or not to create special committees or use existing groups. Some programs have used existing groups of middle management as the major form for discussing retrenchment options. Other programs already have in existence groups that represent the major categories of employes and work locations and can be given a new task of planning for retrenchment. There are tradeoffs. Use of an existing group can avoid the start up processes associated with any new group, but often has past baggage that might get in the way. If the group is viewed by others as fair and effective, it might be appropriate to use the group. If, on the other hand, the group has a reputation for arbitrary decisions or indecisiveness and/or is viewed as being biased in favor of certain segments of the program (e.g., central office versus regional locations, impact versus service work, etc.), then any work of this committee will not be broadly supported.

The two results - creativity and acceptance - that one wants from the process can sometimes be at odds with one another. The most creative committee may not be "representative" since creativity is often associated with persons who are on the margins of the program. Furthermore, it is very difficult to be creative if one is burdened by thinking how would one's constituency react to each idea that is proposed. For these reasons, a program might wish to consider multiple vehicles for work on retrenchment planning. There might be one committee charged with developing options, which then are screened through some different more representative group. The drawback with this approach is the latter group may be less willing to go along with some ideas because they were not part of their development. The literature of acceptance of change clearly demonstrates that participation in the process increases the probability of acceptance.

Multiple or single committees: Some programs have a single committee on retrenchment, others have several with different mandates. For example, some programs have committees on layoffs or to develop reduction in force criteria and separate committees looking at consolidation of offices. Some separate groups have been created to develop new fund raising strategies or to consider possible ways on generating revenue. Whether to have a single or multiple committee has a lot to do with the size of the program and interdependence of the issues. For example, if a program is thinking about radically different forms of delivery in one committee, it may affect the work of another group that is looking at the staff in outlying offices. If there is one committee charged with layoffs and another with new creative options, the optimistic and pessimistic work may become too split off from one another and fail to develop an integrated strategy.

With multiple committees both the substantive overlap and the authority relationships must be clear. The program will need to create integrative de-

vices to keep each group apprised of the relevant work of the other groups. Good notes on the work of the groups may also help keep the rest of the program informed as regards the process. Another strategy is to have sub-committees meet at the same time in parallel sessions with a final half hour given over to reports and work on issues that are on the boundaries.

#### Board's Involvement

The choice of whether or not to involve the Board early on, either as a separate group or with some members on a joint board-staff committee depends on the history of board-program relations and on some prediction of how the board will react to the proposals that finally are developed. If the Board has been relatively inactive and for the most part supports staff developed options, there may be few payoffs to involving the Board early on in an active way. If, on the other hand, the Board has been highly interven-tive and often alters staff recommendations, then earlier Board involvement ought to be considered.

In most programs the Board is playing a final approval role. This ranges from real consideration of options to a pro forma ratification of the plan developed by staff. Whether or not to have the board involved early on and how depends on careful analysis of how the situation is likely to play out. To help one think through this issue, the chart below lays out some of the best/worst case scenarios under the different assumptions of the board involved early or late.

	Board involved actively and early	Board involved late in ratifying role
Best case	Board members make a real contribution as well as helping to ensure the full Board supports the work of the committee	approves the plan with few modifications, willing to take heat on controversial decisions, willing to work actively on implementation especially elements that require support of Bar, or client community
Worst case	politicizes the process prematurely, jockeying for support for previously established positions, replaces creative search for alternatives, little help in ensuring full board support because of factionalism	Board misunderstands complexity of the plan, either fails to reach decisions or acts hastily, overruling the best judgment of staff, unwilling to help with implementation.

The decision tree on the following page suggests under what circumstances the Board should or should not be involved.

If the Board is to be involved, there are several ways. One is to give the Board certain issues that are highly political and the Board is likely to be the court of last resort in anycase. These issues can be given to the Board from the beginning, thereby freeing up the other committees from these highly charged tasks.

Another strategy of involving the Board is to have actual Board representation on the committees. This insures that when the Board gets the final staff recommendations, there will be some knowledgeable board members who can give the Board the thinking behind the various recommendations. A well developed retrenchment plan will be sufficiently complex that there is a real danger of it overwhelming the information processing capability of the Board. By involving some Board members in the plans' development, the Board's ability to play an informed role is increased.

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Is Board likely to support staff recommendations without participation?

Would early participation of selected board members be:

THEN

extremely useful, a real contribution

involve Board for their contributions

neutral, neither a help nor a hindrance

depends, if a chance their participation will make selling the board easier, involve them

a potential burden, could politicize, paralyze process

do not involve the Board early on

extremely useful, a real contribution

involve board both for contribution and to increase chance board will approve plans

neutral, neither a help nor a hindrance

involve board to increase probability of selling board on plan

a potential burden, could politicize, paralyze process

difficult trade-off, often better to fight through the issues earlier and on the program's turf versus leaving them to the board. Need to weigh costs of participation to the process against the increased likelihood of board support of trial package.

YES

NO

On the other side, if the Board is highly politicized and mirrors the same splits that are present in a program, selecting constructive members may be difficult and could inject into the committees a prior stalemate that may simply frustrate the committee and prevent a wide ranging discussion of the options.

In any case, keeping the Board well informed as regards their role, and the ongoing work of the planning process may help prevent some of the worst outcomes.

Even if the Board has not been involved in the staff planning process, some programs have found it useful to have the plan or options first reviewed by a subcommittee of the Board, (either the executive committee, a program committee, or a specially created committee) so that when the plan is presented to the Board, it is coming from a committee of its own and advocates for the plan will be fellow board members versus only staff.

#### Nature and Clarity of Delegation to the Committees

Whatever committees are formed or given the assignment to develop either all or parts of a retrenchment plan, it is critically important that they have a clear understanding of their mandate both in terms of its substantive scope and in terms of its authority. The authority relations cannot be viewed in a vacuum, but involve the relationship of the committee to management and to the Board.

Below are listed different charges to a committee.

1. Give advice, input

This is the weakest role, reacting to proposals that are developed elsewhere (either by the Board or management). There might be some fact gathering responsibilities to calculate the costs of different service configurations or to develop different methods of intake, but all within a framework that someone else establishes. At its most powerful, this role might include an actual vote on various options, but only as an indication of staff preferences, not binding in any way.

2. Develop options

This charge frees a committee up from the political process of developing consensus or figuring out a way to reach a decision. Rather its charge is to develop alternatives and to identify the advantages and disadvantages of each. This charge has the advantage of making all members contribute to all sides of an issue rather than only looking at the positive side of positions they favor and the negative side of positions they oppose.

3. Develop options, recommend

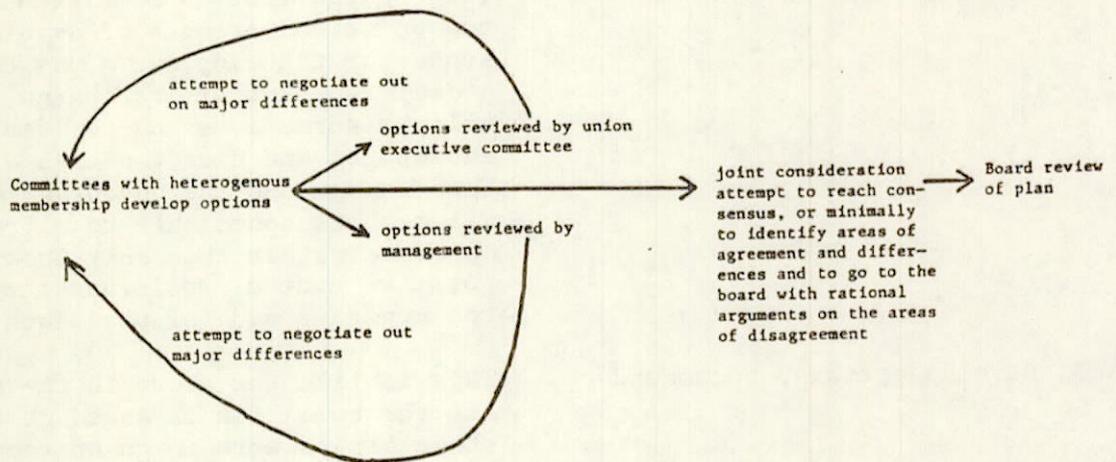
This is like the above in the early stages, but the committee is asked at the final stage of its work to go on record with its preference. How it decides its preference -- majority vote, consensus (how consensus is defined), majority of each of the identifiable subgroups (e.g., labor and management) -- all would need to be worked out.

4. Ratify or veto recommendations developed elsewhere

Here the committee would be reacting to proposals developed elsewhere (as in 1 above) but with the authority to ratify or veto an alternative. The commitment of the Director might be to take no option to the Board that did not get ratified by the committee or to not take options that were vetoed. This might be appropriate in a situation in which the Board has traditionally advocated staff positions against management, and the leadership wants to ensure that any recommendations that he or she takes to the board have the staff's support. As with 3 above, the means of their reaching a decision would have to be clearly established.

There may be advantages to having multiple committees with different charges. For example, the program may look to one committee or work group to develop options and to have a different group charged with reviewing the options and rendering a judgment. This may be particularly appropriate in unionized programs. The process might work as illustrated on the following page.

Sequence of Committee Processes



The amount of influence that the committee feels it has will depend on their understanding of how their work relates to the actions of management or the executive director. For example, if the committee understands its role as making a recommendation after they have developed options, they may expect that their views will go directly to the board, perhaps with some commentary from the executive director identifying areas of agreement and disagreement. However, if the executive director expects to take the recommendations and to rework them in light of his or her views on what is best for the program and then to take the new recommendations to the Board, the committee might feel differently about its overall role in the process. There is no right or wrong way, it is simply that it is important that people know in advance the ground rules.

For example, there might be an understanding that the executive director would return to the committee with any substantial differences to explain them and seek their revision, with the ultimate right to make the decision if the committee does not agree. Or there might be understandings about the presentation of the committee's views to the Board if they differ with the final recommendation of the executive director, or agreements about the presentation of minority viewpoints to the Board as part of an agreement to avoid the behind the scenes politicking that is inevitable if a legitimate channel to the board is not established.

A final issue that relates to the authority of the committee is the relationship of the members to constituencies. Some of the alternatives are as follows:

1. fully empowered to represent (the group, office, bargaining unit, type of employee, etc.) and to negotiate on their behalf with no need to check back after each round of discussion to see how the group might react
2. able to represent the group within previously established guide-

lines dicussed by the group and any new material will have to be checked back with the group

3. information conduit, listens in, participates in the discussion but cannot take positions without checking with the group
4. as an individual responsible only to one's own views (this resembles a jury model in which the group is required to match the characteristics of the larger community but once impanelled are not representatives of the subgroups of which they are members.)

If there are significant differences in the type of representation, the group can be frustrated because one segment is fully empowered to negotiate and the other has to keep checking back. This can significantly affect the temporal rhythm of the work. For example, if representatives are from remote offices there are significant costs to their having to check back with their group.

Different types of representation may make sense at different stages of the process. During the development of options, the fastest, most creative group may be a heterogenous group of individuals (#4). Once they have developed options, they can be circulated to the different constituencies who can meet to discuss and select representatives (#2) of their views to negotiate out differences and reach an acceptable compromise.

#### Rhythm and Timing of Work

Much of the authority for retrenchment work comes from events outside the program - the actions of congress, the presidents, the policies adopted by the Corporation. There are many painful, difficult decisions that will be much more easily reached when key uncertainties become known. Those in charge of the retrenchment effort in a program might do well to set down a timeline of these key external events -- action by each house, conference committee work, the stages of the appropriation and reauthorization process, the actions by the president, the policies that LSC adopts to for the 1982 allocations. Some issues will be for more easily addressed when the true extent of the situation is known.

Conversely, when some of the above uncertainties are known, it will be very difficult to get any groups to be creative beyond responding to the new reality. Therefore, there may be some logic to roughly dividing the planning into two phases:

1. Developing Options: In the early stages a wide range of options are considered based on several scenarios. This stage can try for the most creativity and can begin the work on some of the alternative delivery forms. Here the challenge is to enhance the adaptability of the program.

2. Managing the Transition: When the key information is known (September, October) - the approximate level of funding, the nature of the restrictions, etc., the task is to make the necessary cuts to bring the program into line with the anticipated level of resources. The ideas and options developed during the initial part of the planning are the working capital for the second phase. If there has been some creativity, then the program can make the transition in ways that are not devastating to its new sense of mission. If, on the other hand, little has been developed, then the program will become simply a pared down version of its earlier form.

The importance of some of these external events is such that a program might anchor certain of their decisions based on when some of these events take place. For example, a program could commit to making a final decision on office closings within two weeks after the final appropriation is known. This would clearly signal to staff that management was preparing to make the necessary decisions but would also show how these decisions are linked to events over which management has no control.

Rythm of Committee Work: Committee work is frequently frustrating, particularly during the first few meetings. People sense they are putting in valuable time, but are not seeing results. Often after a few meetings people come

less faithfully, or when they come, they bring other work to hedge their investment of time. Because retrenchment planning is not business as usual, a program might decide to kick off the retrenchment process with an intense two day session to explore fully all the issues -- to brainstorm alternatives, to examine the process and substantive issues, to identify what information will be necessary for the planning work, etc. Such an intensive kick-off can provide some momentum that will help a committee through some of the slow periods in the committee's work.

If there are multiple committees, which is often the case, an intensive two day retreat with all committee members present, doing some work in plenary and some in subcommittees can make the different tasks clearer and provide an easy forum to explore the ways that the committees are interdependent.

It may be that the issues are not well enough defined to kick off a retrenchment planning effort with a two day or intensive session. In such cases, the program might plan such an event after much of the background staffing has been done and even after some of the key uncertainties at the national level are resolved. If such an event is scheduled, staff will feel that tough issues will be addressed and that the uncertainties will not drag on forever.

In any event, programs should not unthinkingly fall into a rhythm of weekly committee meetings without considering the benefits of some more intensive sessions at key stages in the process. Just like labor negotiations, there sometimes needs to be marathon sessions to break through on deadlocked issues.

Staffing: Nothing is more frustrating than to be involved in a committee process that is understaffed. People who agree to serve should be aware of the time commitments not only of the meetings but also outside of the meetings. The committee should not meet unless the necessary staff support work has been done since the last meeting. Those assigned must be relieved from some of their other responsibilities in order to make the necessary commitment. In legal services the tradition of effective joint work is weak. Often many data gathering tasks and/or position papers are better assigned to a single individual who can draw on others as needed. Once the position papers are done, then group meetings can be productive.

Committee leadership: Some committees are directed by someone whose managerial position is also relevant to the issues under discussion, in other instances one of the committee members serves as chair. The leadership can either be appointed by the director or elected by the group. These choices will depend on the norms of the program. If there is a desire to have the committee process relatively independent from management, then elected, non-managers might be most appropriate. This choice runs the greatest risk of a serious split with management's position on the cutback issues. However, if they develop proposals that management can support, the plans will be broadly supported and not viewed as exclusively management's. If the management controls the selection process and selects managers as chairs, then management can ensure the work proceeds in an efficient fashion and is compatible with other actions of management. Conversely, its results will be more viewed as management's.

Given the potential for polarization on many issues, because of the win-lose character of retrenchment planning, the chair should play an active role in facilitating the discussion. Structured meeting techniques like Nom-

inal Group Technique\* in which the entire group is asked to respond to a key question silently, then the responses are listed in a round robin fashion prior to discussion, can be particularly valuable. The chair should often ask for the group as a whole to think on both sides of an issue - such as the pros and cons of closing different offices - rather than letting the two sides emerge as a split in the group.

### Conclusion

Just because retrenchment planning requires complex, sustained committee work does not mean the programs who have had difficulty in this area will magically have the necessary skill. However, programs should carefully think through the choices that are made at every step of the way to ensure that the best possible choices are made that will support the most effective work on these painful issues.

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\*See attachment.

NOMINAL GROUP TECHNIQUE

PURPOSE

1. To organize more productive meetings especially for problem identification, problem-solving, and program planning.
2. To balance and increase participation and reduce errors in group decisions.

SUMMARY

Meetings within organizations are not always productive. Most managers feel that much of their time which is taken up in meetings is not well spent. Nominal Group Technique is a way of organizing a meeting to enhance its productivity. Its purpose is to balance and increase participation, to use different processes for different phases of creative problem solving and to reduce the errors in aggregating individual judgments into group decisions. It is especially useful for problem identification, problem-solving and program planning.

PROCESS

Small group meeting process.

TIME

2-3 hours for the full step-by-step process, although the silent generation and balloting of ideas can be used strategically in a wide variety of situations, taking relatively little time, e.g., for quick agenda setting.

NUMBERS

6-12, larger groups can work in subgroups on the same topic or on different topics depending on the situation. The results can later be shared.

REFERENCES

Delbecq, Andre L., Van de Ven, Andrew H. and Gustafson, David H. Group Techniques for Program Planning, a Guide to Nominal Group Technique and Delphi Processes, Scott Foreman, 1975.

Delbecq, Andre L. and Van de Ven, Andrew H., "A Group Process Model for Identification and Program Planning," Journal of Applied Behavioral Sciences, 1971, 7, pp. 466-492.

## NOMINAL GROUP TECHNIQUE (NGT) \*

It has been estimated that as much as 50-80% of a manager's time is spent in group meetings. Most managers, however, feel that much of this time is not spent effectively. Many problems are encountered by groups in trying to generate ideas, encourage high member involvement, and maintain agendas and time schedules. Very often, some group members are excluded from active participation for a number of good, and frequently not so good, reasons. In other situations, discussion is monopolized by a few group members with meeting outcomes often not accurately reflecting the group's opinion. As the meeting progresses everyone either talks or listens. There is not time for people to think through the issues at hand.

To counter many of these problems, Andre Delbecq and Andrew Van de Ven developed Nominal Group Technique (NGT). Because the process is relatively easy to learn, it can be used immediately by participants in their organizations. They easily can teach these skills to other organization members. Participants often quickly realize the benefits of NGT once they have used it a few times and apply NGT to a variety of other contexts - client meetings, for example.

The name, Nominal Group Technique, describes how the process works. It is a process for a group of people who become a group in name only (hence the name, nominal group) when they are using the technique. The purpose of NGT is to eliminate social and psychological dynamics of group behavior which tend to inhibit individual creativity and participation in group decisions. For the time that the group uses the technique they avoid the normal problems of a few individuals doing all the talking, the rest listening, and very few people taking the time to actually think about the issue at hand. Individuals can be more creative and everyone is given a structured opportunity to participate. This helps to overcome these common problems often encountered in small group meetings organized for the purpose of generating ideas, planning programs, and problem solving.

The following outline lists each step of NGT along with ways in which that step contributes to better meetings and decisions. This listing will help to clarify how and why NGT works. The procedures for each step are explained in the next section.

### A. SILENT GENERATION OF IDEAS IN WRITING

1. Provides time to think
2. Provides a creative setting

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\*This material is a summary and adaptation from Delbecq, Andre L., Van de Ven, Andrew H., and Gustafson, David H., Group Techniques for Program Planning, A Guide to Nominal Group Technique and Delphi Processes, Scott Foreman, 1975, pp. 40-82.

3. Provides focus and uninterrupted thought
4. Encourages each member to search for ideas
5. Avoids competition and status differences
6. Avoids conformity pressures
7. Avoids evaluation and closure
8. Avoids polarizing on ideas

B. RECORDED ROUND-ROBIN LISTING OF IDEAS ON CHART

1. Structures equal sharing and participation
2. Encourages problem-mindedness
3. Encourages each member to build on other members' ideas
4. Depersonalizes ideas
5. Tolerates conflicting ideas
6. Reinforces concentration: hear and see ideas
7. Provides written permanence

C. DISCUSSION AND CLARIFICATION OF EACH IDEA ON CHART

1. Each idea is as important as another
2. Equal time to each idea
3. Clarifies ideas

D. PRELIMINARY VOTE ON PRIORITIES

1. Provides focus on important issues
2. Structures equality in choices
3. Allows a "trial run"
4. Avoids a premature decision
5. Avoids dominance by strong members

E. DISCUSSION OF PRELIMINARY VOTE

1. Clarifies misunderstandings
2. Encourages minority opinions
3. Promotes "criticizing" ideas on wall - not people
4. Provides preparation for decision

F. FINAL VOTE ON PRIORITIES

1. Structures an independent judgment from each member
2. Provides closure
3. Promotes sense of accomplishment
4. Motivates involvement in future phases of planning and problem-solving
5. Provides a written record of the ideas generated

The Process

PREPARATION: A SUCCESSFUL NGT EXPERIENCE DEPENDS ON CAREFUL PLANNING AND PREPARATION BY THE FACILITATOR.

In the NGT process people will be responding to an initial question by the NGT leaders. The nature and quality of the response

will be determined as much by the nature of the question as it is by the NGT process itself. An effective leader should decide on the kind of information he really wants. It is a good idea to pretest the question before the meeting. Remember, global questions stimulate global answers. Affectional, emotional information is obtained only by asking for it directly.

The composition of the group will also depend on important pre-process decisions. From whom is information desired, and what are the objectives of the meeting? Remember a heterogeneous group provides different perspectives on a given situation. A homogeneous group reduces communication barriers, but may simply reinforce accepted ideas, i.e., result in "group think." The quality of the meeting's output will depend on the composition of the group.

STEP 1: SILENT GENERATION OF IDEAS IN WRITING.

10-20 minutes

The leader presents the nominal question to the group in written form. Then he verbally reads the question. He asks each member of the group to take five minutes to list their ideas in response to the question in brief phrases on a piece of paper. The leader requests the group members work silently and independently.

STEP 2: RECORDED ROUND-ROBIN LISTING OF IDEAS ON CHART

20-40 minutes

Each member of the group is asked by the leader to read one of his ideas in turn. The leader writes each idea on the flipchart as it is read. This procedure continues around the table enough times for each member to exhaust his list.

STEP 3: A VERY BRIEF DISCUSSION AND CLARIFICATION OF EACH IDEA ON THE CHART

20-40 minutes

Each idea listed on the chart is discussed in order. The leader points to each idea beginning with the first, reads it out loud, and asks the group if there are any questions, statements of clarification, or statements of agreement or disagreement which members would like to make about it.

STEP 4: PRELIMINARY VOTE ON PRIORITIES: SILENT, INDEPENDENT

10 minutes

- 1) The leader asks the group to select from the entire list of ideas on the flip chart a specific number (5-7 is best) of "priority" or most important items.
  - a) he asks each member to place each priority item on a separate 3 X 5 card.

- b) after members have their set of priority cards completed, the leader asks them to rank-order the cards, one at a time.
- 2) The leader collects the cards and records the vote on a flip chart in front of the group.

Index Card Illustrating Rank-Order Voting Process

Number from the  
flip chart  
list of ideas

<p>5</p> <p style="text-align: center;">The idea written out</p> <p style="text-align: right; margin-right: 20px;"> <u>1</u> - -         </p>
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Number indicating rank-order

STEP 5: MEETING BREAK (COFFEE, COKE, ETC.)

STEP 6: DISCUSSION OF THE PRELIMINARY VOTE

20-40 minutes

The purpose of this discussion is to examine inconsistent voting patterns and to provide for the opportunity to rediscuss items which are perceived as receiving too many or too few votes.

STEP 7: FINAL VOTE ON PRIORITIES: SILENT INDEPENDENT

10 minutes

Repeat step 4 to determine a final list of group priorities. If desired, a more refined voting technique such as rating may be used here.

STEP 8: LISTING AND AGREEMENT ON PRIORITIZED ITEMS

The results from step 7 are listed on the flip chart to provide a permanent record of the groups agreement.

Supplementary Information

Group Size: 7-9 people is the ideal size. 11 people is the absolute maximum.

Larger groups should be divided into groups of 7-9 for the process.

Materials Needed: The following materials are absolutely essential:

1. A flip chart or newsprint for each group.
2. Roll of masking tape.
3. Pack of 3 X 5 cards for each table.
4. Felt pens for each table.
5. Paper and pencil for each participant.

- Physical Setting:
1. Meeting room with table to accommodate groups of 5-9 members.
  2. If more than one group meets in the same room, it is important that the tables be spaced far enough apart so that the noise and activity at one table does not interfere with other tables.
  3. It is helpful to seat participants at a rectangular table arranged as an open U with the flip chart at the open end of the table.

- Time:
1. Varies with the complexity of material and the way in which the technique is adapted to the setting (1 - 2½ hours).
  2. A single highly productive meeting is better than a series of shorter unproductive meetings.

### Uses and Abuses

1. NGT is best used for small group meetings called for the purpose of fact-finding, idea generation, or the search of problems or solutions. It is not for routine business, bargaining, predetermined outcome, or groups requiring consensus.
2. Once this technique becomes familiar, some steps will seem more important than others in different situations. For instance, clarification is more important when people in the group do not know one another or are from different backgrounds.
3. Formal balloting may not be necessary for relatively simple issues or for agenda setting when only a small number of topics emerge.
4. It is often difficult to convince people to use NGT for the first time. The usual question is, "Why is all this structure necessary?" Explanations help to overcome this resistance, but a successful experience helps much more. It is a good idea to try out the process on an issue that can be covered completely in one meeting so that the group can sense the value of the entire process.
5. During early experiences using NGT, it is most difficult for people to keep from discussing issues before all points are listed, clarified, and prioritized. So, extra care must be taken by the facilitator to prevent discussion from starting too soon.

