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Nominal Group Technique & Affinity Clustering
Quick Tips for Team Leaders
Series Article   by Jeff Oltmann

Quick Tips for Team Leaders[1]

Getting Ideas: Nominal Group Technique (NGT) and Affinity Clustering [2]

Jeff Oltmann

Nominal Group Technique (NGT)

Nominal group technique (NGT) is a structured method for group brainstorming that encourages contributions from everyone. See the Brainstorming article for tips and other variations.

When to Use Nominal Group Technique

- When some group members are much more vocal than others.
- When some group members think better in silence.
- When there is concern about some members not participating.
- When the group does not easily generate quantities of ideas.
- When all or some group members are new to the team.
- When the issue is controversial or there is heated conflict.

Nominal Group Technique Procedure

Materials needed: paper and pen or pencil for each individual, flipchart, marking pens, tape.

1. State the subject of the brainstorming. Clarify the statement as needed until everyone understands it.
2. Each team member silently thinks of and writes down as many ideas as possible in a set period of time (5 to 10 minutes).
3. Each member in turn states aloud one idea. Facilitator records it on the flipchart.
   - No discussion is allowed, not even questions for clarification.
   - Ideas given do not need to be from the team member's written list. Indeed, as time goes on, many ideas will not be.

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[1] This series of "Quick Tips" articles is by Jeff Oltmann, experienced program and technology executive and principal of Synergy Professional Services, LLC in Oregon, USA. The Quick Tips offer simple approaches and models for problem analysis, gathering ideas and input from team members, facilitation and taking action. The tips offered in this series were identified or developed over two decades of helping program, project and team leaders get things done in faster, more agile ways. Learn more about Jeff Oltmann in his author profile below.

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o   A member may "pass" his or her turn, and may then add an idea on a subsequent turn.

Continue around the group until all members pass or for an agreed-upon length of time.

4. Discuss each idea in turn. Wording may be changed only when the idea's originator agrees. Ideas may be stricken from the list only by unanimous agreement. Discussion may clarify meaning, explain logic or analysis, raise and answer questions, or state agreement or disagreement.
5. Prioritize the ideas using multivoting or list reduction.

Nominal Group Technique Considerations

- Discussion should be equally balanced among all ideas. The facilitator should not allow discussion to turn into argument. The primary purpose of the discussion is clarification. It is not to resolve differences of opinion.
- Keep all ideas visible. When ideas overflow to additional flipchart pages, post previous pages around the room so all ideas are still visible to everyone.
- See brainstorming for other suggestions to use with this tool.

Excerpted from Nancy R. Tague's *The Quality Toolbox*, Second Edition, ASQ Quality Press, 2004, pages 364–365.

Retrieved from http://asq.org/learn-about-quality/idea-creation-tools/overview/nominal-group.html on 9/2/15

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Affinity Clustering

An affinity diagram is an information organizing tool. It promotes creative synthesis by asking a team to identify and group similar items from a large list of possibilities.   The resulting structured information can then be used in further convergence activities such as ranking and rating. Affinity clustering is often paired with a preceding divergence activity that generates many raw possibilities, like brainstorming.

When to Use
- You need to clarify or structure a large mass of information
- The problem is complex and difficult to understand
- You need to decide which ideas or information are important to the problem
- The problem requires or benefits from involvement of a group

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Procedure

Before the session, write each of the ideas on a small "sticky" (sheet of adhesive note paper). Often, this has already been done during a brainstorming session.   Place all of the stickies in random order on a large, accessible surface such as a wall or table. If the ideas haven't been discussed recently, the team may need time to re-read them.

The team members silently arrange the ideas into similar clusters (affinity clusters) by moving the stickies.   If a team member does not agree with the positioning of a sticky, he can move it into another cluster with which it has a stronger affinity.   No communication is allowed, since this might limit thinking on possible affinities.

This repositioning continues until the affinity clusters have solidified.   Then the facilitator asks members to explain why they organized the ideas into these clusters.   What makes the items in a cluster similar, and how do they differ from other clusters? These discussions may cause further rounds of repositioning.

After the team agrees on characteristics of each cluster, label and describe them.   Examine the relationships between clusters to reveal underlying structure of the problem.

Considerations

1. Draw a "parking lot" in a section of the work area.   If people repeatedly move a specific sticky, this indicates an important disagreement that should be discussed later. Move the contentious sticky to the parking lot for discussion after the silent clustering is done.
2. Do not label the clusters until after the team completely agrees on grouping.   Prematurely labeling emerging groups will limit the teams thinking.
3. The team may want to talk during the positioning.   Discourage communication until the clusters have taken shape and the change rate is low. At that point, there may be some left behind or parking lot stickies that need to be discussed.
4. You can use an online collaborative whiteboard such as Miro or Mural to do affinity clustering with virtual or hybrid teams.

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About the Author

Jeff Oltmann

Oregon, USA

Jeff Oltmann is a seasoned leader with over 30 years of experience advising clients, managing successful technology programs, and developing new products. His specialties include strategy deployment, operational and project excellence, and project portfolio management. As principal consultant at Synergy Professional Services, Jeff advises leaders and teams in diverse sectors including healthcare, research, bioscience, and technology product development.

Jeff is the founder of the Portfolio and Project Leaders Forum. He is also on the graduate faculty of the Division of Management at Oregon Health and Science University and was previously on executive staff at IBM. He teaches portfolio, program, and project management and is a certified Project Management Professional (PMP®).

Jeff welcomes your questions and ideas. You can contact him at jeff@spspro.com or read previous articles at www.spspro.com/article-library.

To view other works by Jeff Oltmann that have been published in the PMWJ, visit his author showcase in the PM World Library at https://pmworldlibrary.net/authors/jeff-oltmann/