Tool 2 – Nominal Group Technique

TOOL: **Nominal Group Technique** (**NGT**) is a group technique for prioritizing items on a list. "Nominal" means number, and in this use it means to use numbers to quantify a subjective judgment. "Group Technique" implies that it is to be used in a group setting to arrive at a consensus ranking. The word "group" could also have come from "grouping" meaning to prioritize. The origin of the label for this technique is unknown.

WHEN: **Nominal Group Technique** is a good technique to: 1) prioritize a list of items, and 2) accomplish that prioritization through the input of several people.

HOW: There are several variation on how to apply the **Nominal Group Technique**. Here are some:

1. Agree on the list of items to be prioritized. Some variations include a Brainstorming exercise. They suggest silent brainstorming, followed by a structured round-robin exercise, and concluding in a quick freeform session *(see Tool **No. 1 Brainstorming**).* If you choose to use a Brainstorming exercise, a new list of items should be built from the brainstormed items to eliminate duplicate items and ambiguous phases. Do not attempt to prioritize a pure brainstormed list. During brainstorming the ideas being offered were never challenged. Now is the time to question the meaning of each item as it gets put on the list of items to be prioritized. Hopefully some items can be consolidated, or re-stated, so there is some parity in the final list. Regardless of how the list is created, it should be gone over item by item to make sure everyone participating understands each item. Do not create categories of items or condense and consolidate the items to such an extreme that there remains little to differentiate. **Caution**: Beware of nested items. That is, an item that includes wholly, or partially, another item. Each item needs to stand on its own.

2. Write every item out. Write them either on the board, or a separate sheet of flip chart paper for the entire group to see.

3A. Have each participant "rank" the items. One method is to give the highest ranking item the highest score. For example, if there were twelve (12) items, an individual's first choice item would get a "score" of '12'. Their lowest valued item would get a "score" of '1'. Each participant must rank/score every item and they cannot give two items the same score. Each participant records their scores, in private, on a ballot. All the scores of all the participants are added, by item, and the item with the highest total score ranks as the number one priority of the group. **Caution:** Beware of participants who do not record a vote for every item, or who give one or more items the same value, or who "split" their vote, giving two items an equal score of '10.5.' Such practices skew an already very subjective process and should be discouraged.

3B. Another method is to tell the group to rank only their top five (or top ten) choices. This is helpful when there is a very long list of items to be considered. Have the rank scoring done the same way as above with the highest score being five, or ten, depending on the number of choices you directed them to make.

3C. A popular variation is for the top ranking score to be '1'. When adding up the 'rankings' it's like golf, the lowest score is the winner! **Caution**: When ranking only the top five or ten, the "non-competitive' items need to all be scores the maximum, like '10'.

3D. A variation on the above method would be to compile a new list of items from the combined top five (or top ten) lists of the individual participants. Then, run the process over again using the short list. This could be repeated again until a very short list of prioritized items is generated.

4. Consider the "Delphi" option. If your desire is to hopefully have a "Consensus" winner, look into the Delphi Technique. There are many variations, but in general it means to share the 'rankings' of all the participants (sometimes anonymously) along with an explanation for the choices made. In a reiterating process the rankings of the participants tend to coalesce and a consensus ranking often results.

5. Discuss the results with the group and particularly how the list will be used. One variation would be to allow the participants to offer up "caveats or concerns" they hold for the top few items on the list.

TIPS: **1.** The best thing you can say about the **Nominal Group Technique** is that it can help you identify the top few items, and/or the bottom few items out of a list. The group will probably be willing to accept a statement that a consensus exists about the extreme top items, or extreme bottom items. Generally, it would be a stretch of their confidence to suggest they are in agreement about the particular ranking of the prioritized list that is the result of this process. This limitation holds true for many other group prioritization schemes.