

## How to listen to delegates and really hear what they say

I've lost count of the number of meetings/workshops/forums/conferences I've attended over the years, to better "inform the Australian horticultural industry" as it says on the mast head, for my column, preferably with a Tasmanian perspective.

With a few exceptions, there are usually PowerPoint presentations up - front (I'd hazard a guess that there is a technical problem with about a third). If there are more than two, the sequence usually runs overtime so the last presenter is at a disadvantage.

These may or may not be summarized. The fun starts if there is a final session along the lines of "where do we go from here?" – a recent one was headed "How can RD and E providers contribute to innovation and economic development?".

That was a very broad question to answer in 30 minutes, which included the group sorting itself into smaller ones with varying speed – seasoned forum followers who knew each other did this quickly, the others looked bemused.

Whether or not the output will be written up and distributed is in the lap of the organizers.

Setting aside the presentations (these can be given to delegates as hard copy or a memory stick but rarely are), that final session could be made much more effective with attention to group dynamics.

The key question the organizers should ask themselves is:

"Are we genuinely interested in what **all** the delegates think?"

If the answer is yes, then group dynamics have to be handled. The extraverts inevitably dominate the introverts if there is an emphasis on verbal "debate" (that's what Power is all about) so this needs to be minimized, to give the introverts a chance.

One format which does this very effectively is "Systematic Objective Nominal Group" (SONG)

"Nominal Group" has been around for about 40 years. The crudest way to run one is to have the facilitator up front recording ideas fired at him from the group on a sheet of butcher's paper. This takes time, the ideas are obviously linked to the individual, and when it comes to trying to categorize the ideas, the sheet looks as though it has had spaghetti thrown at it.

SONG is a much more effective way of doing things. The protocol described is the end result of running about 50 sessions over many years. It works every time, if it's followed to the letter.

I offer it as a present to any reader who is involved in organizing these sorts of events, provided due acknowledgement is given. They may wish to invite me to model it.

Who knows, a University might run through the example given. The industry needs 2 000 university graduates per year – currently the tertiary sector is producing about 700.