

Systematic Objective Nominal Group (SONG)

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The concept

This technique is so named because:

- it enables a group to work **systematically** to generate output, minimizing open ended discussion which is not always productive
- it is **objective** because the output is produced by “secret ballot” which screens out external personal /subjective bias and reduces the impact of dominant personalities
- although it requires a group of people, they do not operate collectively – they are a group “in name only”, hence **nominal group**.

It is ideally suited to situations where it is necessary to refine a fuzzy issue/problem and then devise ways to address/tackle it. With practice, these two steps can be taken in about 3 hours, with sufficient output to generate a concise report quickly.

Recording this output is done by each individual on reporting sheets (“secret ballot”), which are then displayed to the group. In the traditional version of **Nominal Group**, the facilitator summarizes and records the verbal output of individuals on butcher’s paper (“show of hands”) and can steer discussion. This also means that the output is inevitably linked to a person – the “weighting” given to this is often adjusted depending on whether it comes from e.g. the Professor, the Project Officer or a Student.

Further, the output is in the individual’s own words, not summarized by the facilitator. Subtle differences in what is at first glance the same issue come through and the report is genuinely a combined effort. More important, individuals feel they own it.

The protocol

Before the session

Defining the issue/problem to be addressed. This needs to be carefully thought through by the convenors – this is the driving instruction for the group, and clarifying “what exactly do we want to come out of this session?” will improve the quality and relevance of the output. It should be clearly written for display on a sheet of A3 paper.

Choosing the composition and size of group. The composition will depend on the issue. It may be valuable to have discrete groups of, say, academics, administrators and students to give different perspectives to the same issue. The optimum size is seven, the upper limit being about 10 for purely logistical reasons. Four is too small.

Choosing the venue. The most essential requirement is for a reasonably large area on which to display output. A group of seven will generate up to 50 reporting sheets, which will need to be displayed and sorted. Three sheets of butcher’s paper taped to a wall (or preferably three white boards) are the minimum.

Running the session

Each participant will need a felt tip pen and a pad of the largest “Post It” sheets. Draw on a sheet of A3 (“landscape” format) a grid of 10 columns, and label the first five columns A to E. Draw a horizontal line reasonably close to the bottom of the sheet. This will be used to record the groups ranking of their output.

- Display the issue/problem to be addressed on a sheet of A3 paper. As an example,

“The Vice Chancellor has convened a task force to make recommendations for increasing the number of agricultural science enrolments by 10%, by 2013. What do you personally consider to be the main obstacles to achieving this target? Please identify at least five, more if you can, and describe each on a separate sheet”

Five is specified because most participants will come up with the obvious ones first, such as the poor public perception of science – the less obvious ones come when participants are pushed a little.

Asking for one obstacle per sheet may seem superfluous, but experience has shown that some participants will write all five on one sheet unless told otherwise.

- Ask if everyone understands the task at hand, but do NOT encourage discussion. It is appropriate to stress at this point that discussion will come later.
- Set a time for the task. From experience, 15 to 20 minutes is about right. The obvious reasons flow quickly, the less obvious ones take longer - some participants have verified this. Extend the time a little if required.
- When everyone has finished, collect the sheets and display them in about seven columns, randomizing the placement as far as possible, using a member of the group to assist and number them before they are displayed. As this is happening, it is common for participants to spontaneously cluster them – *“Number 6 is almost the same as 33”*
- Facilitate this discussion and rearrange the sheets into discrete columns on a separate board or piece of butcher’s paper - from experience, this usually produces about five columns and one or two “stand alone” statements. This step should take about 15 minutes, more if it is difficult to gain agreement on the clusters.
- Distil from the group an agreed descriptor for each column and label them A through to E or however many columns have been produced.
- The next step is for the group to rank the clusters. The question to be asked of them is

“Looking at this output, what do you think, personally, are the most important obstacles to achieving the increased number of agricultural science graduates?”

- There are several ways of doing this. One is to ask for each to be given a mark out of 10, 10 being the most important. Another is to ask individuals to rank them in order of importance. The disadvantage of this is the tendency for some participants to say *“they’re all important.* Assuming there are five, they can be asked to put a rank of 5 on the most important through to 1 for the least important. This has the disadvantage of participants finding it difficult to make fine distinctions, especially if there are more than five.
- In practice, experience has shown the best compromise is to ask for them to identify the three most important, giving a 3 to the most important, 2 to the second and 1 to the least important, rather than 1, 2 and 3 – most participants associate a high number with high importance, and this should be stressed.
- Ask them to write this on a reporting slip *“Letter 3, Letter 2, Letter 1”* then give them about five minutes to do this.
- It is important for the reporting to be by *“secret ballot”* as well, to avoid group dynamics, so ask a volunteer to collect the slips and read out the results for you to transcribe onto the reporting sheet. This ritual reinforces the point.
- The following is an example of the output from a group of seven. Check that there are the correct number of 1s, 2s and 3s for your group then add them up :

A	B	C	D	E					
1	3	2	2	3					
1	3	3	2	1					
	2	2	2	1					
	3	2		1					
	3	1							
	3	1							
2	17	11	6	6					

“Clearly, you see B as the main obstacle, C as a fairly close second and you have some concern about D and E. Let’s now focus on B and do the same thing again. This time, it would be useful if you could make two practical suggestions which could be implemented to remove this obstacle”

- The same procedure is followed. If time is available, it will be possible to consider C and D. In this example, D and E score equally. The score for D was achieved by 3 times 2 which means that three participants had some concern. The score for E was achieved by one 3 and three 1s, which means only one participant felt strongly and three only mildly. This can be used as a general protocol.
- The output from the session is the data for a report, which can be quickly produced. It is sometimes possible to do this at the end of the session.
- All output should be reported **without editing**, which will ensure group ownership.

*The intellectual property for this version of the Nominal Group technique resides with
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