Nominal Group Technique[1]

Set Up: Break up your large group into smaller groups of 5-7 people and situate them at round tables or chairs clustered around a flip chart.

Materials
- Paper and pen for each participant
- 35-60 index cards for each small group
- 1 sticky flip chart for each small group
- 2-3 markers for each small group

Time Required: **60-90 minutes**
        Step 1:   5 minutes
        Step 2:   10-20 minutes
        Step 3:   15-25 minutes
        Step 4:   10 minutes
        Step 5:   10-20 minutes
        Step 6:   0-20 minutes

Step 1: The Silent Generation of Ideas

Begin by inviting all participants to write their responses to a question for three minutes. If you are working on a list of problems, ask participants a version of the following question: "What are the most significant problems in your area?" A specific example would be, "What are the barriers to achieving population health?"

If you are generating a list of solutions, here is a question you could ask: "How do you get people to volunteer in a religious or community organization?" Say to the group, "Silently list as many answers to the question as you can think of as fast as you can."

Step 2: Round-Robin Recording of Ideas

Ask for someone to volunteer to be the recorder in each group, adding the qualification that you need to be able to read his or her handwriting. The recorder stands at the flip chart, goes around the table asking for one idea from each person in a few words and writes it on the flip chart, numbering them. The words go from the lips of the participant to the ink on the flip chart—no changing, summarizing, or spiffing up by the recorder. When participants try to keep talking after they have stated their ideas, the recorder should gently remind the group that there is no discussion in this step by saying, "Thank you. Let's get the next one." Remind participants that there will be the opportunity for clarification and discussion later. The recorder keeps going around the table until all the ideas on everyone's lists are on the flip chart.

If participants run out of items on their lists, they can pass, but if they think of something else when their turn comes around again, they can jump back in with another idea. It's called hitch-hiking, and

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[1] As developed by Barbara Linney based on the work of Andre Delbecq, Andrew H. Van de Ven, and David Gustafson

it's a good thing. It means a non-judgmental, creative process is prompting people to have new thoughts.

The reason you don't allow discussion in this step (Step 2) is that a long-winded talker can derail your process, or people can get excited about an idea that they hear and stop generating additional ideas. You want everyone to see all the ideas before you start talking about any of them.

A group can generate 20 to 40 items in just 20 minutes. You'll need blue painter's tape or sticky flip chart paper to post the sheets on a wall where everyone can keep seeing the items. Don't just flip over a full sheet.

Here's a sample of answers that have been listed by health care groups when I asked the question: "What are the most significant problems in your area?"

1. Not a good hand off of patients when the shifts change
2. Physicians yell at other physicians, nurses, and sometimes even patients when they are frustrated
3. At 5:00 the nurses start sending all the patients to the Emergency Department so they can go home on time
4. Administrators don't understand patient care
5. Physicians don't understand the needed cost cutting
6. People come up to a nurse and talk to her when she is dispensing medicine causing mistakes
7. Physicians try to change their call schedules when vacation plans change

The benefit of Step 2 is that everyone has spoken and can see on the flipchart what has been said. Thirty minutes into most meetings, you may forget what was said earlier, but you'll never raise your hand and admit you have forgotten. This way everyone can see all that has been said.

Step 3: Serial Discussion for Clarification

The recorder points to each item and asks, "Do you understand this one?" Not "Do you agree?" but, "Do you understand?" On some items, you will get a yes from everyone, and you just move on to the next idea. On others, there will be discussion, and the recorder should allow about three minutes of clarification for each item—not 20 minutes.

Avoid expecting the person who originally listed the idea to be solely responsible for clarification. Many people may have had that idea on their original list. Do not combine similar sounding ideas at this time. Even if one member of the group thinks an idea is the same as another idea, the ideas should remain separate.

Here's a sample of the discussion generated from item 1 on the above list: "Not all information is given to the next physician, nurse, or tech involved in the patient's care. Has a test been ordered? What time was it ordered? How close to ready is a bed on the fourth floor so we can get the patient out of the Emergency Department hallway?"

Step 3 provides an opportunity for controlled discussion and clarification. Remind participants that the goal is to understand each item now so that they can make choices and have informed
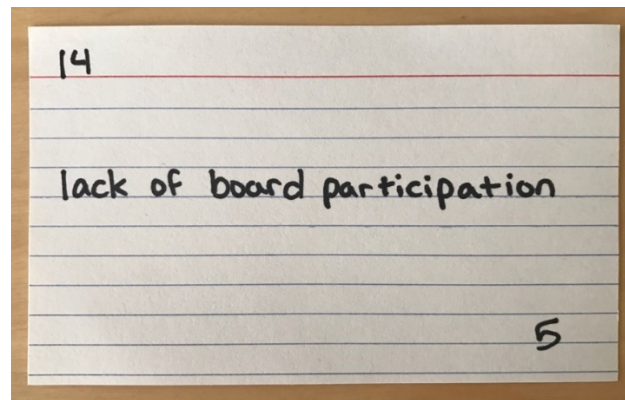
discussions later. This step allows members to disagree without argument since every idea stays on the list.

Step 4: Preliminary Vote on Item Importance

Step 4 goes back to an individual, private activity like Step 1. The participants are asked to choose the five items on their group's list that are most important to them and write each one on a 3 x 5 index card with its corresponding number from the list in the top left-hand corner. Then the leader takes them quickly through a forced-choice ranking.

When I give the instructions for this step, I even say, "For the next few minutes I am going to be bossy and ask you to make decisions quickly just to prove to you that you can. Here goes… Spread out your cards so you can see all of them at once. Choose the one that is the most important to you and put a 5 on it in the bottom right-hand corner." I give them 30 seconds. "Now, of those remaining, choose the one that is the least important to you and put a 1 on it." (30 seconds). "Looking at what is left, choose the one that is most important to you and put a 4 on it. Next, the least important gets a 2 and there should be one left that gets a 3."
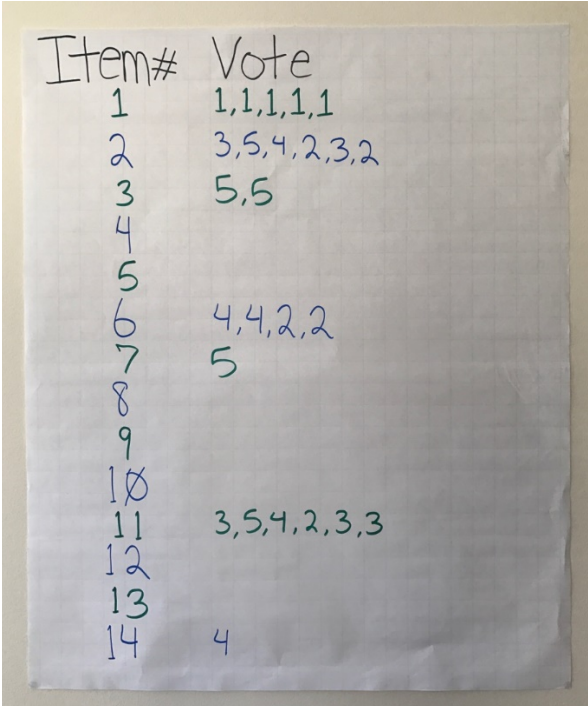
Here's a sample of a participant's most important idea, which was numbered 14 in Step 2:

These instructions show participants how they can make decisions quickly, rather than take ten minutes to labor over how to prioritize the items.
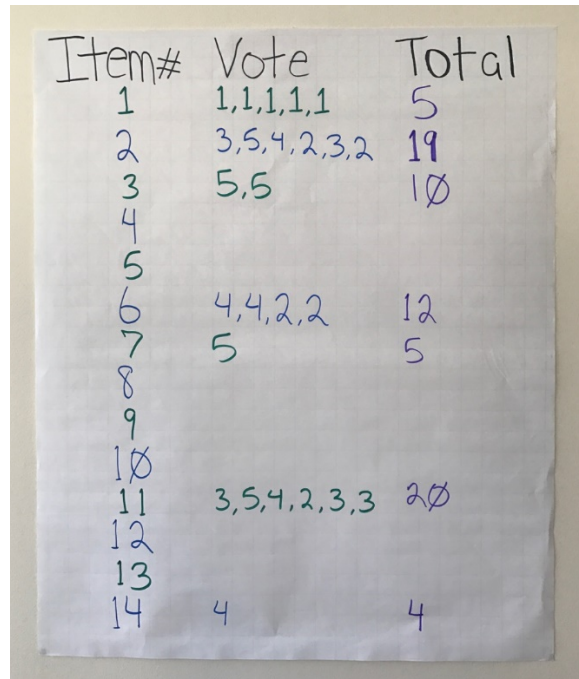
Step 5: Discussion of Preliminary Vote

Then the recorder puts numbers on a clean flip chart sheet that corresponds to the number of items on the original list the group generated, collects all the 3 x 5 cards, and hands them to one group member to call out each item. That person says, "Number 7 got a 5, number 11 got a 3, number 14 got a 4," and so on until all the cards have been read.

Item#	Vote
1	1,1,1,1,1
2	3,5,4,2,3,2
3	5,5
4	
5	
6	4,4,2,2
7	5
8	
9	
10	
11	3,5,4,2,3,3
12	
13	
14	4

The recorder then adds the numbers to see which items have the highest totals.

Item#	Vote	Total
1	1,1,1,1,1	5
2	3,5,4,2,3,2	19
3	5,5	10
4		
5		
6	4,4,2,2	12
7	5	5
8		
9		
10		
11	3,5,4,2,3,3	20
12		
13		
14	4	4

At this point, it's time for some more discussion. I say, "I've been pretending that being completely objective with numbers is a good thing. That is the desirable beginning that lets everyone be heard, helps them see the thinking of the group, and shows how strongly people feel about ideas. Now it's time to switch and be subjective. Ask yourself this question: 'Which is more important—an item that has one 5 or another one that has five 1s?'" The answer is the item with five 1s because it is on five people's lists.

Have people talk about what similar items might be combined. I ask people not to combine ideas before the initial ranking for two reasons. First, the person who gave the idea might think it is a unique idea, but might be unwilling to fight for it. On the other hand, the person could be eager to fight for it and consequently draw the group into a long discussion about an idea that might not actually get any votes. For now, you should ignore the ideas that didn't get any votes.

The length of this discussion is still controlled by the recorder—10 to 20 minutes, not an hour. Sometimes the group can quickly agree on the top two choices, and sometimes the group needs to rank again and go with the two that get the highest numbers. Then each group reports out their top two recommendations to the large group. At this point, there is often greater discussion depending on the time available and even a review of more items than the top two ideas. But now the conversation is much more focused than it would have been under normal meeting circumstances.

Step 6: Additional Voting and Discussion (if needed)

If you have several groups and their top two recommendations are all different, you could have the large group use the ranking process again on the top choices to come up with the one to try first. However, what often happens when generating a list of problems is that the participants are amazed at how similar their responses are.

Here is a portion of one group's prioritized list of solutions to a problem: How do you get people to volunteer in a non-profit organization? They started with 44 ideas, but after going through the NGT process everyone felt comfortable these were the most important solutions:

1. Say, "I will support you."
2. Validate/ highlight their skills. Say, "We need you and your abilities."
3. Ask them face-to-face
4. Know the person you are asking / find out what their passions are
5. Be honest—don't paint a false picture about the task

When I facilitate groups using this process, I type everything on the flip charts and send them back to the participants just in case an item that didn't receive any votes could be used at a later time. In organizations, it's often easier to solicit input than it is to create buy-in, but Nominal Group Technique helps you to accomplish both by allowing participants to see the thinking of the group. You can then use the prioritized list of solutions or problems to help you determine the next steps your organization should take.