

SMALL GROUP PROCESSES
FOR IDENTIFYING PROBLEMS AND POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

by James L. Creighton

Traditionally, the emphasis in public involvement has been on large public meetings. Yet this tradition flies in the face of a considerable body of research evidence that suggests that small groups work far more effectively than large groups. The ideal group size is usually defined as in the range from five to nine persons. As the number increases in a group, some participants will "drop out" and participate minimally. This increases the likelihood that the group will be dominated by the stronger personalities. The group begins to break into "leaders" and "followers" and the chances of polarization increase. When group size is much below five, there is less likelihood of getting a stimulating interaction of different viewpoints.

The importance of this research for public involvement is that it points out the need to utilize small group techniques as a means of increasing program effectiveness. This chapter will describe two of the small group techniques that have proved highly successful in working with the public. [For another, see L. Aggens, "The Samoan Circle," p. 259.] Both of these techniques have the advantage of small group interaction, but can be readily used with a large group which is broken down into smaller worker groups. The two techniques are particularly usable for identifying problems and possible solutions. Neither technique is designed for decision making.

THE NEED FOR TECHNIQUES

The obvious question is: "Why the need for special techniques? Can't a group of people just sit around and talk?" Of course they can, particularly if they are friends who share a somewhat similar perspective on an issue. But if the participants are strangers, or if they take opposing sides on an issue, then more may be accomplished if some simple techniques are employed.

Some people are very slow to participate with strangers or with people they believe will be very critical of their comments. In addition, this climate of discomfort runs counter to the climate of psychological security that is necessary for creativity. Creativity, by its very nature, means trying out new ideas. This requires taking a risk that others may disapprove of the ideas. This is possible for many people only in a group where "permission" is granted to consider new and different ideas. Most people must be comfortable before they will really open up in a group. Since this is difficult to achieve in a group of strangers, or a group with strongly opposing viewpoints, small group techniques are designed to create the "permission" for people to participate openly and share their creative ideas. These techniques can reduce the period of discomfort and move the group quickly into productive work. In fact, work teams and groups of friends which are

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supposedly comfortable in working together will often find their effectiveness increased by utilizing these techniques.

The two techniques which we will concentrate on here--Nominal Group Process and Brainstorming--solve the problem of creating a climate of psychological safety, but in two different ways.

NOMINAL GROUP PROCESS

The Nominal Group Process was designed based on research which suggests that individuals generate more creative ideas and information when they work in the presence of each other but do not interact. According to this research, when people interact in groups, they are more likely to react to each other's ideas rather than come up with new ideas, or consider new dimensions of the problem.

The procedure for Nominal Group Process is as follows:

1. **OPENING PRESENTATION:**

After an initial presentation explaining the Nominal Group Process, the audience is broken into small groups of six to nine participants.

2. **STAFF AND ADVANCE PREPARATION:**

Each group is assigned a discussion leader and recorder. Prior to the meeting, these staff persons will put up four sheets of newsprint, and also have felt-tipped pens, scratch paper, pencils and 3 x 5 cards ready.

3. **INTRODUCTIONS:**

The discussion leader will introduce himself/herself and invite everyone in the group to do the same.

4. **POSING THE QUESTION:**

The discussion leader will then present the group with a predeveloped question such as: "What are the water problems in the James River study area which affect you?" The discussion leader will write the question at the top of one of the flip chart sheets.

5. **GENERATING IDEAS:**

Participants are provided with paper or file cards and asked to write on the paper all the answers they can think of to the question posted. Their notes will not be collected, but will be for their own use.

Time: 5-10 minutes.

6. RECORDING IDEAS:

Each person, in turn, is then asked for one idea to be recorded on the newsprint. The idea will be summarized by the recorder on the newsprint as accurately as possible. No discussion is permitted. Participants are not limited to the ideas they have written down, but can share new ideas that have been triggered by others' ideas. Anyone can say "PASS" without giving up their turn on the next round. The process continues until everyone is "passing." Alphabetize the ideas on the list: A-Z, AA-ZZ, etc.

7. DISCUSSION:

Time is then allowed for discussion of each item, beginning at the top of the list. The discussion should be aimed toward understanding each idea, its importance, or its weaknesses. While people can criticize an idea, it is preferable that they simply make their points and not get into an extended argument. Move rapidly through the list as there is always a tendency to take too long on the first half of the list and then not be able to do justice to the second half.

Time: 40-60 minutes.

8. SELECTING FAVORED IDEAS:

Each person then picks the ideas that he/she thinks are the most important or best. Instructions should be given to pick a specific number, such as the best five, or the best eight. These ideas should be written on a slip of paper or 3 x 5 card, one idea per card. They may just want to record the letter of the item on the list (A, F, BB, etc.) or a brief summary, so that they don't have to write out the entire idea.

Time: 5 minutes.

9. RANKING FAVORED IDEAS:

Participants then arrange their cards in preferential order, with the ones they like the most at the top. If they have been asked to select eight ideas, then have them put an "8" on the most favored and number on down to a "1" on the least favored (the number will change with the number of ideas selected). A score sheet should then be posted which contains all the alphabet letters used in the listing. Then the participants read their ratings ("... R-6, P-2, BB-8, ...") which are then recorded on the score sheet. When all the scores have been shared, then tally the score for each letter of the alphabet. The highest scoring item can be shown as #1, etc. Post the rankings for the top 5-7 items, depending on where a natural break occurs between high scores and low scores.

Time: 5 minutes.

10. DISCUSSION OF RESULTS:

The participants may then want to discuss the results. Someone may point out what two very similar items "split the vote" and were they to be combined they would constitute a single priority item. If the group as a whole wants to combine them this is acceptable. It should be pointed out, though, that an analysis will be made of all the results, not just the priority items.

Time: 5 minutes.

TOTAL PROCESS TIME: 1 1/2-2 hours, plus time for opening presentation.

USES OF NOMINAL GROUP PROCESS

If the full Nominal Group Process is utilized as indicated above, the cumulative time of opening presentation, Nominal Group Process, and reports back to the total group (assuming a larger audience has been broken into small groups) would probably mean a total time of 2 1/2-3 hours. This would be the equivalent of an entire evening meeting. It is possible, however, to utilize portions of the process. For example:

Everyone in an audience can be asked to generate ideas on 3 X 5 cards. The ideas can then be given an initial ranking by the number of times an idea occurs (although this may not be a measure that an idea is good, but simply that a number of people are aware of it).

After a series of alternatives has been presented (along with some time for discussion) the participants can rank the alternatives on 3 X 5 cards and a tally developed for the group. This runs the danger of appearing to be a vote which may be misleading unless the audience is very representative; but the same danger is inherent any time a ranking process is used.

Nominal Group Process can be utilized for problem identification, for generating solution elements, and also for identifying impacts of alternatives. It must be understood--and this should be stressed to the participants--that all the ideas generated require subsequent detailed staff analysis. It is also important that this analysis be communicated to participants as soon as it is available, with opportunities provided for them to respond to the analysis.

One danger of Nominal Group Process--or any complicated small group technique--is that the public may feel "processed" rather than included. If, for example, there was a great deal of animosity toward the study, then it might be wise to allow this feeling to be "ventilated" to the total audience so that the breakdown into small groups and use of Nominal Group Process is not seen as an effort to control, manipulate, or "divide and conquer."

BRAINSTORMING

While there is research evidence that suggests that group effectiveness may be superior using Nominal Group Process compared to Brainstorming, Brainstorming is such a simple, easy-to-use technique that it is much more frequently used as a participatory technique.

Brainstorming strives to solve three problems:

1. The need for a climate of psychological safety for creativity to be encouraged.
2. The need for people to suspend evaluation in order to be creative.
3. The tendency to approach problems in a fixed, limited way.

The procedures of Brainstorming are quite simple:

1. ALL EVALUATION SUSPENDED:

Participants are encouraged to generate as many ideas as possible in response to a question or problem statement with no evaluation allowed. All ideas, regardless of their apparent validity, are written down on a flip chart (or better yet, pre-hung flip chart paper). A discussion leader will gently, but firmly, remind all participants to stop any evaluation that occurs, including hoots or laughter.

2. "WAY-OUT" IDEAS ENCOURAGED:

Since there is a tendency to approach problems in a rigid, fixed manner, only those ideas which fit this limited approach appear "sensible." To break out of a single approach to the problem, participants are encouraged to generate all kinds of ideas, including "way-out" ideas. This has caused the technique to be called "Blue-skying" based on the notion that "the sky's the limit." While a particular "way-out" idea may not itself be useful, it may contribute to a new way of thinking about a problem and be a path to other ideas which are extremely productive or creative.

3. GROUP SELECTS EVALUATION PROCESS:

Brainstorming by itself does not result in any evaluation but produces an "undigested" list of ideas. As a result it is necessary for the group to utilize some means of evaluation to narrow down the list, unless this narrowing will be done by a subsequent staff evaluation. Some of the methods which can be employed include:

- a. Discuss Each Item: If there is ample time then it is ideal to be able to discuss each item, as after discussion ideas that initially seemed improbable may seem quite productive. This can, however, be extremely time-consuming.

- b. Brief Discussion - Individual Rating: An alternative would be to utilize the evaluation system from the Nominal Group Process discussed above. In this approach there is a brief discussion of each idea, usually focused around clarification of the idea more than debate, followed by a ranking of ideas using 3 X 5 cards. This saves time, but there is greater risk that some idea, the value of which is not as immediately apparent, will not receive adequate attention since only a limited number of ideas are selected for priority.
- c. Straw Vote: Another method is the straw vote. In the straw vote a question is agreed upon such as, "Which ideas do you feel are worth further consideration?" Then each participant is allowed to vote for as many ideas as they wish. Theoretically, a participant could vote for all the ideas; but, in fact, some ideas will receive votes from all participants, some will receive none, and most will receive a few. One important thing about straw votes is that the results are advisory. The group may choose to accept the outcome of the straw vote, or it may choose to alter it or simply use it as the starting point for further evaluation.
- d. Eliminate the Useless Ideas: Some groups find that they can take the time to discuss every idea once they have weeded out those ideas that are obviously useless. One way this is done is to quickly move through the list, and participants can state which ideas they believe are useless. Unless someone else is willing to make a defense of an idea, it is eliminated. If someone does seriously defend the idea, then the idea usually is left in by the group for further evaluation.

VARIATIONS ON BRAINSTORMING

Other brainstorming skills: Groups that do a lot of brainstorming usually acquire some "advanced skills" at brainstorming. Three of the most frequently used techniques are:

Piggy-Backing: This is the skill of taking the idea of someone else in the group and expanding or enlarging it to produce other solutions. To do this, you must be able to fully understand the significance of a concept and extrapolate the concept beyond the implication expressed by the first person.

Combination: This is the skill of taking other ideas which have been proposed and combining them in some way which maximizes their strengths or eliminates their weaknesses.

Fantasy Analogy: One way to break down old ways of thinking about the problem is to project a fantasy of the most desirable of all possible solutions. This form of analogy might begin: "In my wildest fantasies, I would like to" (This technique is taken from William J. J. Gordon's book Synectics, which contains a number of techniques for increasing creativity with a variety of analogy techniques.)

USES OF BRAINSTORMING

Brainstorming is equally useful in problem identification, generation of possible solutions, or identification of possible impacts of alternatives. Brainstorming will typically generate an extremely large quantity of ideas which must somehow be evaluated in ways acceptable to the group. Brainstorming is a particularly good beginning activity for a small group, as it always produces results and usually generates a high level of energy and enthusiasm. The difficulty is to maintain this same energy and enthusiasm during the evaluation period. Because of its simplicity and the short period of time required for brainstorming, it can be effectively combined with numerous other workshop activities.

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