

Reflections On Congregational Life

THE NOMINAL GROUP PROCESS®

by
Peter Rudowski
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While I was studying for my D.Min. degree at McCormick Theological Seminary, the seminary was designing a new curriculum to enable its students to meet the challenges of 21st century ministry. The administration asked its 100 plus D.Min. students for their input because it thought these pastors were the “experts” with first hand knowledge concerning the skills required to meet the challenges ahead. To get the desired information, groups of D.Min students were asked to participate in a Nominal Group Process.

Over the years, I have used the Nominal Group Process as a way to determine where a Christian Education Committee, a Property Committee, or an Outreach Committee should concentrate its efforts in the coming year(s). Normally, I used this process at the first meeting of a committee as a way to identify areas of concentration and to build ownership in the committee’s future work. The following is a description of how the Nominal Group Process works.

Nominal Group Process

A nominal group process is used to seek information and to set goals for a governing board, committee chairpersons, committee members, and/or unofficial (not-elected) leaders. Ideally, the group has between 10 and 15 participants. The process is as follows

1. Group members write their suggestions to answer a single question. For example, a question for the governing board might be, “What ministries can we add to our ministry portfolio to help us achieve our purpose?” For a Christian Education Committee, the question might be, “What courses and/or teacher training can we add to our Sunday School program?” For a Property Committee, the question might be, “What can we do to make our building more user friendly for our visitors?” Group members have between five and ten minutes to write down, on a piece of paper, as many answers to the question as they would like.

A positive and/or future directed question

greatly reduces or eliminates defensiveness by group members.

2. Using a round-robin method, record and number all the suggested answers on a whiteboard or newsprint pad so everyone can see each suggestion. A round-robin method means that a group member reads one of his or her suggestions, then another member reads one suggestion, etc. After each member has read one of his or her suggestions, the member who started the process reads his or her second suggestion. The round-robin continues until each member has read all his or her suggestions. Some participants will have more suggestions than others. In the later rounds, those who still have suggestions continue the round-robin.

The reason for the round-robin method is if one member reads all of his or her suggestions before others have a chance to read theirs, the third or fourth member will probably say, “All of my suggestions are already recorded.” In other words, “I am not part of the process.” A round-robin method guarantees everyone is part of the process.

3. After all the suggestions are recorded, members can ask questions about any suggestion. A questioner may not criticize or argue for or against any answer. Questioning is strictly for clarification and/or understanding.

4. Combine similar suggestions. For example, suggested answers to the question, “What courses and/or teacher training can we add to our Sunday School program?”, are: 1. Build a computer lab; 2. Adopt a rotation curriculum model; 3. Provide instruction on the importance of stories and how to tell them well; 4. Add music to the curriculum; 5. Refurbish all Sunday School rooms to make them more inviting to students; 6. Combine grades 4-6 to present a biblical drama. (There will probably be up to 15 more suggestions.) In the six answers above, #2, #4, and #6 can be combined; i.e., “Adopt a rotation philosophy by adding music and drama to the 4 - 6 grade curriculum through a biblical play presented at the end of the Sunday

School year." All members must agree to the combination. The combining of suggestions creates a "new" list of suggestions. Each suggestion in the new list is numbered.

4. Give each member five 3 x 5 cards. Ask members to choose the five suggestions that are their top priorities. Members are to write one suggestion in the middle of each card. They also write the number of the suggestion in the upper left hand corner of the card.

5. Members now prioritize their five suggestions in the following order. Their top suggestion receives 5 points which is recorded in the lower right hand corner of the card. Next, the lowest priority of the five suggestions is chosen and receives 1 point which is recorded in the lower right hand corner of the card. Next, the second highest priority is chosen and receives 4 points which is recorded in the lower right hand corner of the card. Next, the second lowest priority is chosen and receives 2 points which is recorded in the lower right hand corner of the card. Finally, the remaining suggestion gets 3 points which is recorded in the lower right hand corner.

6. Record the number of points each suggestion receives. For example, six members gave "Adopt a rotation philosophy by adding music and drama to the 4 - 6 grade curriculum through a biblical play presented at the end of the Sunday School year." five points for a total of 30 points, three members gave a ranking of four points for a total of 12 points, three members gave a ranking of three points for a total of 9 points, and one member gave a ranking of two points for a total of 2 points. Adding together all the points gives a total of 53 points for this suggestion. This process is repeated for all the suggestions.

7. Let us imagine that the participants chose their five top suggestions from a list of 20 possible suggestions or combined suggestions. According to the points awarded to each answer, rearrange the list numerically in descending order.

8. Following the above process, between three and five answers will be bunched together at the top of the list. Perhaps the scores will range, in descending order, from 53 to 45. There will be a gap between these suggestions and the remaining 15 to 17 suggestions whose scores range somewhere between 30 and 10 points. The actual points are not what is important. What is important is that there is a clear separation between the top suggestions and the majority of suggestions at the bottom of the list.

9. Once the top suggestions are identified, a strategic plan is designed for each suggestion. A strategic plan includes: 1. Identify potential leaders and followers to implement changes or new ministry programs required by the suggestion. 2. Identify the resources needed to implement the change or addition; i.e., staff, space, equipment, financial support, and those who will participate in the ministry program. 3. Identify and communicate the "what" and the "why" of the suggestion with those who will directly impacted by the suggestion. 4. Identify the medium to be used to communicate the suggested change or addition to the congregation. 5. Establish a time table for implementing the suggestion.

If there are three suggestions to be implemented, a strategic plan for each suggestion is designed. It will probably be overwhelming for multiple suggestions to be implemented at the same time. Therefore, group members need to agree upon the order in which the suggestions will be implemented into the congregation.

The Nominal Group Process is an excellent way for a committee or a group to identify specific areas of concentration for its work in the coming year(s). People are often amazed at the separation between the top suggestions and other suggestions. Seeing that separation, through a very concrete process, usually builds enthusiasm and ownership for the work that will occur.

A Warning

The Nominal Group Process is public. Those who participate in the process immediately know the outcome. Therefore, if a leader decides to use this process, that leader must be willing to accept the suggestions made by those participating. If the top suggestions match the leaders goals, then all is well. But, if the top suggestions run counter to the leader's personal priorities and goals, then leader must accept the decision of the group or lose credibility.

Peter Rudowski served as a parish pastor for 33 years. In this capacity, he developed knowledge and skills in parish administration and organizational systems. He now serves as a consultant to pastors and congregations. He is also the author of CONNECTING THE DOTS: Ministering To Your Congregation Through Its Organizational System published by Xlibris - order via the internet at xlibris.com He can be contacted for a consultation at: phone 513-791-8920 or e-mail address: prudowski@fuse.net