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## Using Nominal Group Techniques for Helping New Extension Agents Understand How to Effectively Involve Advisory Committee Members

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## Using Nominal Group Techniques for Helping New Extension Agents Understand How to Effectively Involve Advisory Committee Members

### Abstract

Advisory committees are a key component of true grassroots extension programming. Seasoned Extension agents can be very adept at using advisory committee members to multiply their efforts while further enhancing skills among these volunteers. For many new Extension agents, however, this can be a great challenge. Through interactive use of the nominal group technique, new Extension agents at the University of Florida have been able to share many ideas about effectively involving advisory committee members, and they have learned about this innovative group process technique.

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## Introduction

There are many seasoned Extension agents who are masters at involving and working with advisory committees. Through insights gained in reading and in training, and particularly through day-to-day experience, these agents have learned the "ins and outs" of effective involvement of local people in volunteer support for Extension. As these agents know, advisory committees have their own special personalities, expectations, and idiosyncrasies. An effective agent is able to determine what these are and make adaptations and adjustments as needed to create a "good fit" and working relationship between the agent and the advisory group. The agent's consideration of the advisory group members, their needs and expectations, and the potential intrinsic rewards to them from their involvement with Extension is paramount to the committee's contribution.

Among the many challenges that new Extension agents face, perhaps one of the greatest is the effective utilization of advisory committees. This requires an in-depth understanding of a committee's personality, the clear conveyance of what they are being asked to do, the ability to gain and hold their interest and involvement in the process, and providing them with the information and resources they need to accomplish what is being asked of them.

At the University of Florida, newly hired Extension agents attend three sessions of orientation and training designed to increase their skills, confidence, and effectiveness. Along with subjects on program development, teaching, and evaluation, one of the key topic areas includes utilizing Extension advisory committees.

To help agents understand the use and value of advisory committees, the nominal group technique has been used to actively involve agents in a hands-on learning process. This technique has been beneficial because it provides an opportunity for dynamic involvement of everyone within each cohort group of new faculty.

## Nominal Group Process

### Steps Used for the Nominal Group Process

- A facilitator presents an idea or issue for the group to address.
- Index cards are provided for participants to silently generate ideas or solutions to what is posed to the group.
- After individual idea generation, participants share one of their ideas at a time (in round robin fashion), and these are written on easel sheets to be posted around the room.
- Once all ideas are posted, then participants have an opportunity to discuss, clarify, or evaluate anything that is posted.
- Upon concluding this discussion and evaluation, group members vote on the top ideas or issues. The group is typically trying to find their top five items.

### **Benefits of the Nominal Group Process**

- Because of the silent generation of ideas, every person has an equal opportunity to participate. This minimizes the cases where one person tries to dominate or another person sits back without participating.
- Because evaluation of ideas is postponed until all ideas are posted, there is greater opportunity for many more ideas to be expressed. Participants are more likely to get involved and share if their ideas are not immediately shot down.
- Because the whole group is involved in the process, there is greater buy-in and consensus by all members. This leads to legitimate idea or issues prioritization among the group.

The nominal group process has been used with six different cohort groups of new Extension agents. As of this writing, this has included 110 new county agents since its inception in 2001. Agents represented diverse program areas, including Horticulture, Sea Grant, 4-H, FCS, and Agriculture and Natural Resource. With each cohort group, the new agents were instructed on how to use the nominal group technique. Each group then used the nominal group technique to develop a list of ways advisory committee members could be used more effectively.

## **Results**

After working with the six different cohort groups through the orientation and training program at the University of Florida, many innovative ideas were submitted by the new agents for actively involving advisory committee members. Because it can be a struggle to find ways to involve advisory committee members in Extension programming, this provided an opportunity for agents to share and discuss innovative ideas that they had used, observed or were aware of. Moreover, this provided an actual learning experience with the nominal group technique.

The resulting qualitative data from these six cohort groups were entered into a word document and categorized for further analysis. Through content analysis, major and minor themes emerged for reporting the findings. The comprehensive results from the cohort groups were summarized and were later categorized into three major categories, Volunteer/Advisory Committee Management, Meeting Management, and Involving Members in Programming. Each of these three categories was then divided into appropriate minor clusters. The minor categories identified for each cluster included:

### **Advisory committee management**

- Recruiting
- Orientation and training to Extension and the advisory committee
- Building rapport and relationships
- Recognition and rewards

### **Meeting Management**

- Settings for meetings that are comfortable and inviting
- Meeting organization that is prompt and effective, and enables a good use of time

### **Involving Advisory Committees in Extension Programming**

- Obtaining quality input for truly identifying grassroots needs (not a rubberstamp function)
- Member involvement in actual Extension programming (via needs analysis, marketing, promotion, facilitating, etc.)

## Summary

There are many ways that we can better involve advisory committee members and volunteers in Extension programs. The ideas posed here are not exhaustive, but they can serve as a good foundation. Agent experience plays an important role in both recognizing areas and ways for member involvement. This then leads to greater member empowerment and engagement.

The most important take-home message from this experience has been what new Extension agents have learned through this process. Through active use of the nominal group technique, agents have not only learned about a group technique, but they have also learned and shared ideas about advisory committees. During each of these groups there was a great deal of discussion and sharing about what works, as well as, what does not work. This educational method opened the door to enable this valuable discourse.

## Reference

Place, N. T., Fox, P., & Summerhill, W. (2005). *Extension advisory committees* [Web-based learning module]. Available at:<http://pdec.ifas.ufl.edu/>

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