

STYBEL PEABODY & ASSOCIATES, INC.



Maryanne Peabody and Larry Stybel are co-founders of Stybel Peabody Associates, Inc. Its mission is to Partner with Clients for Success in Leadership Succession. For more information, contact peabody@stybelpeabody.com

Why is Brainstorming Overrated? What is the Alternative?

An important issue confronts your team. You structure an open discussion or brainstorming. The problem is that such forums create illusions of consensus. There's an alternative way to structure team discussions.

The Open-Forum Paradox

Open forums or brainstorming are open in name only. The first problem is that some people try to get a sense of what the highest-ranking person in the room thinks. They then skew their ideas to agree with that authority.

In our consulting practice, we have seen dramatic examples where authority figures deliberately skew the team into a false consensus by using nonverbal gestures: fidgeting in the seat, crossing legs, moving one foot up and down rapidly, vigorously nodding and smiling, etc. The leader can now claim the idea was fully discussed by the team.

A second problem is that some people prefer to keep quiet until they have read the room. They then voice agreement with the consensus.

A third problem is that some people in the room tend to dominate discussions. Introverted participants are reluctant to interrupt. When silence-presumes-consent is the unstated group norm, you get an illusion of agreement.

Nominal Technique

The nominal group technique (NGT) is a structured method of discussion that gets contributions from everyone and facilitates quick agreement on the relative importance of issues. The superiority of NGT over open forums has been well-researched. For example, Harvey & Holmes (2012), McPhail (2001), Horton, (1980), Mullen et al, (1991).

The national CEO peer support forum Vistage uses NGT as its structure for meetings. We run a monthly Zoom program for board directors and another monthly Zoom program for chief HR officers. We use NGT as the structure for discussion with both forums.

An Example of NGT

In a recent Zoom forum for HR officers, one member raised a work-related dilemma and asked for peer recommendations. The moderator organized the meeting into four structured segments: questions, recommendations, ranking, and follow-up.

During the questions phase, the moderator went around the room and allowed each participant to ask questions. No recommendations were permitted. This format permitted all participants to have a say.

During the recommendations phase, the moderator went around the room and allowed each participant to make recommendations. The presenter was not permitted to verbally respond. The idea was to focus on the ideas and not defend oneself. The presenter was asked to write down every idea presented.

During the ranking phase, the moderator asked the presenter to rank recommendations in terms of "most likely to implement." The presenter discussed what made these recommendations stand out as viable. The focus was on the ideas and not who presented the ideas.

Thirty days later the Zoom forum meets. The moderator will ask the presenter what has transpired. In other words, the presenter is held accountable for acting upon the recommendation chosen by the presenter.

Summary and Conclusions

"Open" forums are open in name only. In our group facilitation, we use a well-researched tool called nominal group technique (NGT) that helps solve problems.

Try it out with your team or board. Let us know the results.

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Stybel Peabody Associates, Inc. helps client companies pass the leadership baton and reinforce corporate values to critical stakeholders.

Core services revolve around retained search limited to Board Directors, CEOs, CFOs, and COOs; leadership coaching at this level; and C-Suite Outplacement.

Business leaders wishing a free 30-minute consult can contact:

Maryanne Peabody

Stybel Peabody Associates, Inc.

peabody@stybelpeabody.com

stybelpeabody.com

boardoptions.com