

## Techniques to Structure Dialogue

True dialogue happens when *everyone* in a meeting gets a chance to **think through, express, and grow** their perspective on an issue. Here are three techniques and tools that can be helpful: Paired Comparisons, Option Grids, and Nominal Group Technique. Each of these techniques can be done in a variety of ways. As facilitator, experiment to generate different degrees of dialogue and debate.

### Technique: Paired Comparisons

This is useful if the group is faced with a number of options and needs to prioritize among them.

Write each option on a card (e.g. reviews/feedback, conflict resolution, etc.) Create a space to vertically rank each of the five cards. Hold up two cards (A atop B) and ask: “Is A a higher priority than B?” Invite a short discussion; every participant must vote “yes” or “no” (no abstentions!). Order cards to reflect the vote.

If majority “yes,” then place them as follows in the priority ladder:

A  
B

If “no,” then like this:

B  
A

Let’s assume A trumped B. We’ll then add another choice into the mix and ask if C is a higher priority than B? If no, it gets bumped down. If yes, compare it versus A. Continue until you have a prioritized list.

## Technique: Nominal Group

This is useful when the group needs to prioritize among multiple options.

Create a master chart on which you will document colleague's collective order of priority among the options. Number of rows = number of people ranking, plus final row for total.

Ask each person to privately rank the options in order of priority. The ranks = the number of options (i.e. low = 1, high = 4 if you are discussing 4 options). Make sure all agree on what is meant by "priority" in this case. Then, review the options one at a time, inviting comments from the group (i.e. Who thinks this is high priority and why?). Go through all options, with discussion and follow with a collective ranking (publicly or privately).

In the case below, the group would probably want to dig further into options 1 and 2 – but could safely take 3 and 4 off the priority list for now.

### Example

People	Option 1	Option 2	Option 3	Option 4
Val	4	2	1	3
Peter	4	3	1	2
Jeanette	3	4	1	2
Karen	2	4	3	1
Marian	3	4	2	1
Peter N.	4	3	2	1
	Total: 18	Total: 20	Total: 10	Total: 10

## Technique: Option Comparison Grid

This is helpful if a group needs to “screen” a number of comparable ideas.

Decide (beforehand or with the group) on a few criteria against which the group will judge each idea. Set up a scale for each criteria such that the highest ends of the scale line up (i.e. most urgent, highest public impact, biggest bang for buck, best use of our time – are all on the far right of the scale). Invite people to discuss each idea, one idea-at-a-time, by weighing it against each of the criteria.

People can discuss each idea without “agreeing” where it goes. It is a way to help each person examine each idea, and hear others’ views, in a structured way.

Example Criteria	← Scale →			
<b>Percent of Staff Benefiting</b>	Unknown	Low	Mid-Range	High
<b>Urgency</b>	Unknown	Low	Medium	High
<b>Financial Cost</b>	Unknown	Not Much	Some	A Lot
<b>Person-Power Required</b>	Unknown	Not much	Medium	High