



Get In Focus: Using Stakeholder Focus Groups to Improve Your Procurement Processes

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Imagine if it was a simple, straightforward process for small, local businesses in your community to learn about new contracting opportunities. Imagine if you were confident that your government was entering into contracts that would deliver the goods and services your community needs—and that if the vendors delivering those goods and services ran into difficulties, that your team would have the tools to help the vendors get back on track.

Sounds good, right? This is the kind of scenario that we hope all Procurement Excellence Network (PEN) members feel supported to achieve.

One of the key resources for working towards procurement transformation is clear, actionable information about both what is

working well and what might need fixing in procurement operations. By gathering data from key stakeholders (both internal and external) about the way procurement works in your government, you can identify quick wins to help you chart a path to making your procurement processes more efficient, equitable, results-driven, and strategic.

There are several key tools in the toolbox for gathering this information. The Procurement Excellence Network has written previously about [gathering feedback from internal customers](#), [using process mapping to more clearly diagnose challenges](#), and [soliciting feedback from vendors via surveys](#). **In this publication, we'll focus on another of these tools: focus groups.**



What Are Focus Groups?

Focus groups are a way to gather targeted, specific, and detailed feedback from a small group of stakeholders. In simple terms, whoever is organizing a focus group brings together a group of people and asks for their feedback on a specific topic. In marketing, an advertiser might convene a focus group to determine how well a particular ad campaign worked; in the entertainment industry, a studio might gather feedback from a focus group on alternate endings for a movie.

What sets focus groups apart from other ways of gathering information, such as surveys, is that they are interactive. Both surveys and focus groups allow organizers to ask participants specific questions—but unlike surveys, focus groups allow an organizer to engage directly with a participant if something in their answer sparks further questions or leads the discussion in a new direction, which allows for deeper engagement. And unlike surveys, focus groups allow participants to engage not just with the individual or organization soliciting information but also with their fellow participants.

When Should You Consider a Focus Group?

Because of their interactive nature, focus groups can provide a way to do a “deep dive” into a particular topic or add additional nuance to a particular discussion or decision. For this reason, they are sometimes conducted in concert with a formal survey: an organizer might choose to conduct a broad survey to gather information from a large audience, and then gather more detailed insight from a smaller focus group.

For purchasing offices, here are some instances where a focus group might be particularly helpful:

- 1. With local businesses who don't currently bid on your solicitations:** Perhaps your government receives fewer responses to its solicitations than you think it should. A survey of businesses who don't respond to government contracting opportunities about why they chose not to bid can help you understand potential barriers (long payment timeframes, prohibitive bonding or insurance requirements, too short of a posting period, or the cost of submitting a bid, to name a few) and a focus group could help you understand the impact of those barriers, or gain deeper insight into which of these barriers you might want to tackle first.
- 2. With internal customers from other government departments or agencies:** Perhaps you know your purchasing office doesn't have a great reputation among other departments or agencies with whom you work, or perhaps you've seen certain departments attempt to circumvent procurement rules. A focus group with stakeholders from other teams could help you identify ways to provide improved customer service to those within your wider government.



- 3. With current or prospective vendors with expertise in a particular subject area:** Perhaps there's a particular good or service you are hoping to procure and you have a plan in mind for how to obtain what you need, but you want to make sure that there's interest and capacity among vendors before you begin writing your solicitation. A focus group with current or potential vendors can help you gauge whether your approach is likely to garner the type of responses you're looking for. Remember to consult with your legal counsel to structure this type of engagement with businesses to be permissible under your procurement rules.
- 4. With recipients of a contracted service provided by a vendor:** Perhaps you want to make sure that a particular vendor you have been working with is meeting your community's needs. Whether that service is relatively simple (emptying trashcans at the local park) or more complex (homelessness prevention and rehousing services) a focus group with members of the community directly impacted by the service can help you gauge your vendors' performance and identify unmet needs for your next solicitation.

How to Conduct a Focus Group

If you're going to conduct a focus group, there are several things you can do to help set yourself up to gain clear, useful, and actionable information. Here are some best practices to keep in mind.

Before the focus group:

- *Establish clear goals.* You're more likely to get the information you're looking for if you have a clear set of questions. Whether you're engaging with business owners about the success of a recent outreach campaign or discussing process delays with colleagues in government, the clearer and more targeted your questions, the more likely you are to get responses you can act on.
- *Identify target participants.* It can be tempting to bring together a wide range of participants to try to get as many varied views as possible. However, focus groups are most likely to be successful when you have a clear participant identity, because when participants share similar contexts, the insights they offer can build on each other. We suggest drawing participants from groups with defined identities (e.g., professional service contractors in a particular field, or members of a specific ethnic chamber of commerce).
- *Limit group size.* If you want to get input from many people, a survey may be more effective. Focus groups are most successful when you limit the number of participants, because it allows for deeper discussion and for every individual to share their perspective. We suggest that 5-8 people is about right.



- *Schedule thoughtfully.* Focus groups require more commitment than simply taking a survey. Offering multiple times for participation, scheduling well in advance, and holding at least one session after standard working hours are ways you can increase the likelihood of your participants being willing to take the time to answer your questions.
- *Choose a neutral, strong moderator.* Guiding your focus group participants through the discussion is key to making sure that you achieve the goals that you've identified. A moderator can make sure that participants stay on topic, tease out nuances in participants' answers, and keep more reserved participants engaged.
- *Communicate clearly ahead of time.* Sharing the questions that you plan to ask in advance can help your participants clarify their feedback in their own minds before sharing it with you. And communicating clearly with your moderator ahead of time about the goals of the focus group and their roles and responsibilities is equally important.

During the focus group:

- *Establish group norms.* Help participants feel comfortable sharing their opinions with you by establishing group norms upfront. Norms around confidentiality ("what's said here, stays here") anonymity, and allowing others time to speak can be particularly helpful.
- *Be clear about your objectives and asks.* Give participants a clear understanding of the type of information you're looking for and why you're interested in their opinion. What insights can they offer that other groups might not have?
- *Respect your participants' time.* Make sure you stick with a clear agenda and set of questions, redirect off-topic discussions to a parking lot, and do your best to make space for every participant to speak. Focus groups are a gift of your participants' experience and expertise; being respectful of their time is a way of respecting what they're sharing with you.
- *Use appropriate tools to facilitate discussion.* Moderation is one essential tool for focus groups, but don't overlook incorporating other techniques. Using multiple ways of soliciting feedback (verbal discussion, written discussion via a chat tool, silent brainstorming, feedback via post-it notes, live survey links, or soliciting reactions to visual diagrams or infographics) allows participants to engage in ways they feel most comfortable and can help tease out information in new ways. Live notetaking (e.g., via a projected PowerPoint presentation) allows for greater accuracy and transparency in real time.
- *Take clear notes.* In addition to live notetaking, you likely want to have a notetaker present, record the discussion (after permission from participants and with the clarification that it will be deleted after capturing key notes), or both.



After the Focus Group:

- *Summarize findings and identify key themes.* Dedicate time to doing a deep dive into the information shared during the focus group. By synthesizing participants' feedback, you can draw out nuances and make connections to inform future action.
- *Report back to participants.* Best practice for tools like surveys and focus groups is to report back to participants about the key findings and themes from their feedback, as well as any actions you plan to take in response, if appropriate. "Closing the loop" in this way shows participants how much you value their opinions, time, and expertise. Of course, you'll need to be mindful of norms established during the focus group around confidentiality and anonymity.
- *Request further feedback.* Even though you've spent your focus group soliciting your participants' feedback, you might consider asking them to complete a brief post-session survey to learn whether they found the focus group helpful and discover whether there are ways you might improve further focus group sessions.
- *Consider compensation.* Some governments are able to provide compensation to focus group participants to thank them for their feedback. Appropriate compensation might be a catered lunch/coffee and snacks, gift card, or any branded swag your government may have. Be sure to consult with your legal or finance department to follow any government specific rules.
- *Allow what you've heard to change your approach to procurement transformation.* This last step is key: after all, the point of gathering clear, actionable data from stakeholders is to allow that feedback to inform your procurement transformation. You should use the information gathered to lead to direct action and changes. Also, be open to the possibility that problems you'd considered low priority might in fact be important to tackle right away. That said, don't feel pressure to tackle everything you've learned at once! Project plans can help you implement different reforms in a sequenced and thoughtful way based on focus group feedback.

Toolkit and Best Practices

When conducting a focus group, there are several things you can do to help set yourself up to successfully gain clear, useful, actionable information. Below you'll find some tools to use in your own focus group, with some best practices to keep in mind.

- [Focus group outreach email](#). Use this sample email as a basis for a message asking your potential focus group participants to register their interest in participating or to indicate scheduling preferences for participation. This example invites vendors who do business with the government to participate, but it can be easily tailored for other audiences.



- [Vendor Focus Group Slide Deck](#). This slide deck is a tool you can adapt and use for your own needs. We have designed it particularly with vendor focus groups in mind, but it can be a template for any type of focus group. You should feel free to edit and adapt this presentation for your own use.
- [Focus Group Facilitation Guide and Run of Show](#). This guide provides a framework for facilitating your focus group, including roles and responsibilities, a suggested run of show, and some sample talking points.

Conclusion

If procurement transformation is a priority for your team, you've likely already considered trying to gather information from stakeholders. We hope this guide to focus groups makes it easier for you to get clear, actionable information from those with whom you work!

The **Procurement Excellence Network** is an initiative of the Government Performance Lab designed to help public sector leaders use government procurement as a tool to improve resident outcomes and advance equity. The **Government Performance Lab**, housed at the Taubman Center for State and Local Government at the Harvard Kennedy School, conducts research on how governments can improve the results they achieve for their citizens. An important part of this research model involves providing hands-on technical assistance to state and local governments. Through this involvement, we gain insights into the barriers that governments face and the solutions that can overcome these barriers. By engaging current students and recent graduates in this effort, we are able to provide experiential learning as well.

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