HARVARD Kennedy School
Government Performance Lab

Procurement Excellence Network

Busting Your RFP Assumptions Toolkit Overview

Authors: **Hope Patterson, Scott Kleiman, Kate Mertz**

Contributors: **Kailey Burger Ayogu, Colin Erhardt, Elena Hoffnagle**

Introduction

Facing time pressure, government agencies can be tempted to reuse solicitations (including RFPs, ITBs, and RFQs) year after year without considering changes to their strategic priorities, advancements in the marketplace, or lessons learned from previous contracts. Tight timelines, complex programs, and limited staff capacity can make it difficult for agencies to systematically reassess needs and gather strategic input from relevant stakeholders.

As a result, many procurements fail to attract new vendors or generate proposals with innovative approaches. **To overcome these challenges, this easy and efficient "assumption-busting" exercise helps departments or agencies to gather a small group of internal stakeholders to stress test their planned procurement approach and uncover topics that may need additional analysis or refinement.** This activity is best conducted once a preliminary set of ideas has been developed but before the solicitation – such as an RFP – has been written. It's especially useful for "stale" solicitations, or ones that have been repeatedly re-procured without any updates or changes and a fresh take is needed. But it's also only one step in the RFP process: you'll need future sessions to plan, draft, and review your RFP later on.

For a step-by-step guide to each component of RFP drafting, check out our how-to guide Crafting a Results-Driven Request for Proposals.

In this document, we'll guide you through the planning, logistics setup, and follow-up for facilitating an assumption-busting session. In our accompanying meeting template, you'll find a slide deck that you can modify to use as a starting point for leading your own session. The template includes a sample agenda and instructions for facilitating the session, as well as an applied example to see the assumption busting-exercise in action!

Guiding Questions to Get Started

Before scheduling your assumption-busting session, you should reflect on what you're planning to procure and answer a few initial questions in a short (typically two pages or less) write-up that you can share with session participants as pre-read context. This will help everyone to be on the same page about the procurement before you meet. Consider addressing the below guiding questions in your summary write-up:

Problem Statement	What is the problem this procurement is intended to help address? How have you tried to solve this problem in the past?
Goals	What outcome goal(s) is the department or agency trying to make progress on through this contract? What is the gap between where you are today and where you want to be?
Target Population	Who is the target population, or intended user(s), for this product or service? Describe this population and their needs.
Required Scope	What does the vendor need to do as part of the Scope of Work? Which elements are required to realize your outcome of interest, comply with the law, or align with your government's priorities?
Challenges & Risks	What is keeping you up at night about this procurement? What are the biggest risks to successful service delivery? How will you mitigate these?

Once you've summarized what you're planning to procure, share your write-up with session participants at least three business days in advance of your session. This pre-writing will save you time when presenting your summary during the session and give participants an opportunity to think about their questions.

Planning Your Assumption Busting Session

In your assumption busting session, participants will identify any untested assumptions, incomplete ideas, and unnecessary requirements in the planned RFP. By the end of the session, the group will identify a priority set of questions that need to be resolved before drafting the RFP and brainstorm strategies for additional analysis or information gathering that can help resolve outstanding questions. See the table below for guidance on preparing for your session:

Suggested duration	**1.5 – 2.5 hours.** More time is typically needed to discuss procurements that are complex or in an early stage of development. Sometimes multiple sessions may be required.
Suggested participants	• **1-2 facilitators** if available; otherwise, the presenters can double as facilitators. • **2-3 presenters**. These should be the staff who will most closely inform or who will write the scope of work or RFP. • **2-8 subject matter experts**. These may be informed users of the product or service you're procuring, such as program staff, or leaders who need to be brought into the decision-making process.
Materials needed	• **Sticky notes** (several for each participant) • **Markers** (one for each participant) • **A whiteboard or large blank wall** to use for posting sticky notes • **Printed copies of the presenters' written summary** of what needs to be procured and why

A note about virtual sessions: A virtual assumption-busting session may be better suited for larger groups or dispersed teams, since physical space and supplies may be limited. Facilitators may also find it easier to manage the larger number of questions and ideas in a virtual setting. You'll need to use a virtual collaboration platform, such as Google Docs or Microsoft Word online, in place of a whiteboard and sticky notes. You'll also need a shareable link to the presenters' written summary of what needs to be procured and why to send to participants in advance of and during the session. The accompanying slide deck template presumes that the assumption-busting session will take place in person, but the deck can easily be adapted for a virtual setting.

Session Agenda

For a 90-minute session, we'd suggest the following agenda:

5 min.	**Introductions and ground rules** SLIDE 3	Start off by asking everyone to share their name, role, and department, then set the right tone by explaining the ground rules for discussion (e.g. there are no dumb questions or bad ideas, all ideas and voices should be treated as equals, etc.).
10 min.	**Procurement strategy** SLIDE 4	Highlight the main ideas from the write-up you shared in advance (see "Guiding Questions to Get Started" above, and focus on explaining what you think you need to procure and what's been challenging about this in the past).
5 min.	**Generate initial questions** SLIDE 6	Participants will have 5 minutes to write down three initial questions, reactions, or comments about the presented procurement approach. You can share prompts to jog their thinking.
20 min.	**Identify assumptions and gaps** SLIDE 8	Participants will voice over their questions, reactions, and comments. You'll group similar comments and questions together on the wall and stick any tangents or off-track ideas in a "parking lot."
20 min.	**Prioritize topics** SLIDE 9	Synthesize the thematic groups that emerged in the previous section into 5-7 "big questions" or topics, and then work with participants to prioritize the three most important themes to address.
20 min.	**Brainstorm strategies for analysis and additional information-gathering** SLIDE 10	As a group, brainstorm an initial set of next steps for tackling each of the top three themes.
10 min.	**Wrap-up** SLIDE 11	Summarize key questions identified and priorities for additional analysis and review any next steps for the group. Within a week of the session, send participants a written summary of the priority outstanding questions/themes and the next steps you agreed upon.

You can find a template slide deck to guide you through facilitating each part of the agenda here.

Next Steps for Facilitators

After the session concludes, presenters should finish organizing any remaining questions into themes, including questions in the parking lot, and synthesize these questions and themes into a summary document to share with all participants (ideally within one week of the session). You might include the 3 most important themes identified during the session at the top, along with notes from the discussion that took place on slide 10. For the remaining questions, it may be helpful to share a plan for how they will be addressed during the RFP drafting process and who is responsible for each. See slide 13 in the accompanying deck for an example of what this could look like.

Presenters should also explain how they plan to engage participants throughout the solicitation drafting process. Participants in this session may be a useful group to tap to workshop an RFP draft or strategize about vendor outreach. If the first RFP draft still closely resembles the previous RFP or has unresolved questions about the goals or scope of work, you may want to consider holding another assumption-busting session – perhaps with a different group of participants.

For more information on drafting solicitations, check out the Solicitation Planning, Writing, & Evaluation section of the Procurement Excellence Network's Resource Library.

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.

The Government Performance Lab is grateful for support from Bloomberg Philanthropies.