

> Activity

How to Run a Focus Group

Hosting a focus group is one way to foster open dialogue with your employees about how you can improve their jobs. A focus group is essentially a group interview. This interactive research experience helps employees feel more comfortable sharing their honest opinions about work culture. And unlike staff surveys, those hosting the focus group can prompt and ask for details and stories that deepen the understanding of the staff experience. Use this tool to reflect with your project team about how you want to work together and run a focus group. It includes the following steps:

1. Determine who you want to talk to
2. Identify hosts
3. Prepare for the focus group
4. Host the focus group
5. Debrief and identify key takeaways

Set aside 60-90 minutes to plan and draft questions plus time to engage participants and host the focus group.

Step 1: Determine Who to Talk To

Once you have identified the job outcome or the job characteristic you want to address, you want to consider who from the organization has a unique perspective on this issue. For example, if you want to improve perceived supervisor support, you will want to talk to those who are supervised and their supervisors.

Rule of thumb: Talk to at least 5–6 people from each user group to begin to hear themes. **A user group is a set of people that have shared goals, interests or concerns.** In this example, you would want to talk to 5–6 supervisors and 5–6 people who are supervised.

Step 2: Identify Hosts

It is best if two people host a focus group. This allows one person to ask questions and the other to observe and take notes. It is important to carefully consider who has trust with those who are being interviewed. To ensure honest feedback, you will want to eliminate power dynamics as much as possible between the interviewee and interviewer. For instance, employees may be hesitant to be critical of leadership that has power over their day-to-day activities or paycheck.

Step 3: Prepare for the Focus Group

Each focus group will take 60-90 minutes, plus time for setup and debrief.

Develop an Interview Guide

An interview guide is a set of questions that will be explored during the focus group. Unlike a survey or questionnaire, the questions asked during the focus group should be open-ended and invoke storytelling. For a 60 minute focus group, it is suggested that you ask no more than 6–8 questions so that each person in the group gets a chance to respond.

Learning from Employees

Sample Questions

- What does feeling valued look like to you at this organization?
- Imagine you had a magic wand. If you could change one thing about our culture, what would it be?
- Fill out this statement.
 - I would change _____ about our culture by doing _____.
 - When we do make this change, it will result in _____.
 - In your own words, what does collaboration at work mean to you? Why do you think collaboration at work is important?

Get Familiar with the Interview Guide

Hosts should be familiar with the questions prior to the focus groups. This allows the host to adapt the questions to match their conversation style, creating a more authentic engagement with staff. Remember to practice empathy and be open to learning something new!

Step 4: Host the Focus Group

Make sure that the focus group can be conducted in a private, comfortable space. Some employers offer a gift card to participants as a way to say thank you for their time — whether it's stepping away from the work midday or sticking around after a shift has ended.

Step 5: Debrief and Key Takeaways

With a partner, block 30 minutes following the focus group to recap what you both heard. Take time to share key takeaways from the conversation and discuss how the focus group made you feel.

Learning from Employees

Focus Group Planning Guide

Getting Started

Business issue(s) we want to learn about:

Who will we interview? (Consider who will be most impacted by this issue. Do you have a variety of roles and perspectives?)

Roles

Interviewer (skilled at engaging dialogue, not in supervisory relationship with participants)

Notetaker (good listener, good at capturing detailed notes)

What Questions Will We Ask?

Tips:

- Limit to 6-8 questions to allow everyone to respond
- Ask questions neutrally
- Ask open-ended questions
- Challenge the assumptions we are making.
- Get to the heart of what we really need to know.
- Probe on the challenges and hurdles we identified.
- Ask questions that lead to stories. "Tell me more..."

Learning from Employees

Focus Group Planning Guide

Debrief: What Did You Learn?

What are your top five takeaways from the focus group?

What attitudes or comments did you notice that were interesting or different?

What short-term and long-term opportunities do you see to address your business issue?
