

Ask the Expert

Q: I need to develop a communication strategy to introduce a large-scale change, and I'm not sure how the change will be received. I'd like to conduct some focus groups to gain a better understanding of people's views. What's the best way to go about it?



A: To increase the likelihood that a change will be viewed positively, you need insight into the thinking of key stakeholders before you begin communicating. Focus groups are an excellent way to gather this type of feedback. To prepare for these focus groups, I would start by building a discussion guide – i.e., a list of questions – that explores the issues shown in the figure below. Understanding stakeholders' views on these issues will help you gauge potential reactions to the change and overcome barriers that could derail a favorable introduction.

Figure 1. Issues to explore in focus groups before communicating a change

Understand stakeholders' ...	By gauging...
Knowledge and feelings about the current state	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding of what exists today • Common beliefs and perceptions • Satisfaction with the status quo
Potential reaction to change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Likely issues and concerns • Changes that should make people happy • Odds of a positive, neutral or negative reaction overall
Views on communicating the change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication challenges from a stakeholder perspective • Actions and outcomes that could cause problems • Effective ways to reach stakeholders and influence opinions

Identifying participants

Once you've drafted a discussion guide detailing questions to ask, you need to determine whom to include in the research. The answer will depend on how many discrete populations you need to speak with. For example, you might need to compare and contrast people's views by location, salary level and job type. Strive to do at least two sessions with each target group – more as your budget and timeframe allow.

Note that the right number of sessions is not based on statistical considerations. Focus group results, unlike surveys, are not meant to be statistically significant. Instead, focus groups are designed to help you gauge stakeholders' perceptions, generate new ideas and insights, understand why people hold certain views or take certain actions. Even doing just a handful of sessions can shape your thinking in ways that add real value.

Facilitating focus groups

When leading focus groups, it's important not to bias the results – which can be trickier than it sounds. By following these general guidelines, you will avoid some common mistakes:

DO...

- **Begin with a noncontroversial topic** to warm people up and get them talking.
- **Organize the discussion logically.** Consider the types of replies you may elicit from each question, and then structure your questions so the discussion flows smoothly from topic to topic. In particular: try to lessen the likelihood of rehashing the same feedback in response to different questions.
- **Maintain a freewheeling discussion.** Be prepared to deviate from the discussion guide as you probe and clarify people's responses.
- **Ask only open-ended questions.** These cannot be answered with a simple "yes" or "no" or other fixed answer choice. Remember: the goal is to stimulate dialogue and gather insights, not to determine that x percent of people feel a certain way. If you want statistical data, you need to conduct a survey.

DONT...

- **Use jargon** and other terms participants might not understand. Instead, use participants' language.
- **Ask leading questions**, e.g., those that suggest a particular bias or imply thoughts and opinions participants may not have. Instead, phrase all questions in a neutral manner.
- **Ask "why,"** as doing so can make people defensive and encourage explanations that are logical, but untrue. Instead, probe the underlying thoughts and feelings that drive people's beliefs.

Reporting results

Once you've completed the research, you need to document your results in a report. I like to begin focus group reports with a brief section outlining the project's objectives and methodology, followed by key conclusions and then a summary of findings grouped by topic area. For a more detailed report, I also include verbatim comments pertaining to each topic, grouped according to whether a comment is positive, neutral or negative. This presentation of the data makes lengthy reports easy to scan.

After you've written your report, an essential next step is to boil the results down to a few punch lines you can share with others in meetings and emails. These summary results will likely become the legacy of your research – so it pays to give careful attention to what you want others to remember most.