



Busting your RFP assumptions: Group exercise and facilitation guide

This technical guide describes an approach for government agencies to rapidly produce constructive feedback from internal stakeholders about ways to strengthen a planned procurement.

Government agencies often reuse procurement documents year after year without considering changes to their priorities, advancements in the marketplace, or opportunities for new solutions. Tight timelines, complex programs, and limited staff resources can make it difficult for agencies to systematically reassess needs and gather strategic input. As a result, many procurements fail to generate innovative responses or increase competition with new vendors.

To overcome these challenges, the GPL developed an easy and efficient “assumption-busting” exercise through which agencies can gather a small group of internal stakeholders to stress test the initial theories about the planned procurement approach and uncover topics that may need additional analysis or refinement. This activity is best conducted once a preliminary set of ideas have been developed but before the primary procurement documents – such as a request for proposals (RFP) – has been written.



A team conducting an assumption-busting session together.

There are four parts to these facilitation instructions for an “assumption-busting” session: planning, room setup, facilitation, and appendices with guidance for drafting a pre-read document for participants, illustrative ground rules for the session, and discussion prompts to which participants can respond:

1. Planning your “assumption-busting” session

<i>Purpose and anticipated results</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The group will the group identify any untested assumptions, incomplete ideas, and unnecessary requirements in the planned procurement. 2. The group will identify a priority set of questions that need to be resolved before drafting an RFP for the good or service.
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	3. The group will brainstorm strategies for additional analysis or information gathering that can help resolve outstanding questions.
<i>Suggested duration</i>	1.5 – 2.5 hours. More time is typically needed to discuss procurements that are complex or in an early stage of development.
<i>Suggested participants</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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 write the scope of work. • 2-8 respondents. These may be informed users of the good or service you’re procuring, such as program staff, or leadership that needs to be brought into the decision-making process.
<i>Materials needed</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sticky notes (several for each participant) • Markers (one for each participant) • A whiteboard or large blank wall • Printed copies of the presenters’ written summary of what needs to be procured and why

2. Pre-work and room setup

Time	Activity	Instructions
3 working days prior	Pre-Reading	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presenters send a short write-up of their ideas about what needs to be procured and why to the group – typically no longer than 2-pages. • Six guiding questions to consider when drafting this overview of the planned procurement are included as Appendix A. • Document should be sent to participants to review at least 3 working days ahead of the scheduled session.
Before participants arrive	Room setup	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give each participant the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Several sticky notes ○ A marker ○ A physical copy of the write-up ○ A copy of the “ground rules” appendix • Clear a whiteboard or wall to use for posting sticky notes.

3. Facilitation, with illustrative timing for 2-hour session

Time	Activity	• Instructions
10 minutes	Introductions and ground rules	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitators welcome the group and lead a quick round of introductions. • Facilitators explain the “ground rules” for the session (see Appendix B for potential ground rules).
10 minutes	Procurement strategy presentation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The presenters spend 10 minutes only highlighting the main ideas from the distributed write-up. • Facilitators set a timer to keep this presentation concise. The value in this session is in responding to the presentation, not the presentation itself. • Presenters should be focused on explaining what they think they need to procure and why – this is the opportunity to level set so everyone in the room has a baseline understanding of the planned solution and approach.
5 minutes	Generate initial questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give everyone (including presenters) 5 minutes to write down three initial questions or comments about the presented procurement approach that would be useful for the procurement authors to consider. Each question should go on its own sticky note. • Prompts that may help participants generate questions or comments are included in Appendix C.
30 minutes	Identifying assumptions and gaps	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The purpose of the next 30 minutes is to get everyone’s comments and questions up on the wall using sticky notes, and group these into themes. • Facilitators lead a discussion by asking participants to share the comments they wrote down. As participants voice their comments, facilitators post the sticky note on the wall and group similar notes together. • If someone voices a comment or question that isn’t already on a sticky note, facilitators should generate one and post it on the wall.

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If someone is not engaged in the discussion, ask them to share one of the 3 initial comments they wrote down. • If a comment seems off track or is focused on suggesting <i>answers</i> rather than generating <i>questions</i>, stick it off to the side in a “parking lot.”
30 minutes	Prioritizing topics to resolve	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The purpose of this section is to prioritize the most important themes (sticky note groups) that have emerged in terms of importance of resolving/answering before writing the RFP. • Facilitators review the groups of sticky notes on the board and synthesize the questions on the board into 5-7 “big questions” or topics the group has identified. • Ask the group to prioritize the 3 most important themes to address before the agency finalizing the RFP.
30 minutes	Brainstorming strategies for analysis and gathering more information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The purpose of this section is to generate an initial set of steps for tackling each of the top 3 themes or questions. • For each priority topic, ask the group: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ “What information would we need to answer this question?” ○ “How should we gather this information?” ○ “Who is responsible for doing this? When will they do it?” ○ “How will we decide how to incorporate the information gathered into the procurement?”
15 minutes	Wrap-up	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Summarize key questions identified and priorities for additional analysis. • Review any next steps with the group. Typically, presenters will circulate a written summary to the group for comment, once information has been gathered to answer the priority outstanding questions or themes.

For more information on results-driven contracting strategies that can improve procurement results, including an example from Rhode Island that draws upon this approach, please visit our website at <https://govlab.hks.harvard.edu/results-driven-contracting>.

Appendix A. Guiding questions to consider when drafting an overview of the planned procurement for participants to read ahead

1. Problem Statement: What problem are you trying to solve?
2. Goals/Outcomes: What is your department aiming to achieve with this procurement? Identify up to three goals that paint a vision of success.
3. Metrics: How will you measure whether or not you have made progress on these goals? Who will be responsible for tracking the data? Identify at least one metric for each goal and data sources for each.
4. Scope of Work: What elements of the contract will be required? Where could you allow vendors flexibility to develop innovative solutions?
5. Incentives: What incentives, if any, do you plan to incorporate into the contract?
6. Contract Management: How will you structure contract management for this RFP, including data reporting and meeting elements?

Appendix B. “Assumption Buster” exercise illustrative ground rules

1. The group collectively owns getting this procurement right. While the individuals presenting the procurement may be responsible for drafting an RFP, the whole agency is responsible for the success of the procurement and resulting contract. Questions raised about the procurement are therefore directed at the group rather than any one person.
2. Discussion will be focused around questions, not answers. Facilitators will keep the conversation focused on generating questions and identifying unchecked assumptions. While the group will brainstorm how to collect information to answer these questions, the group will not debate what the right answers actually are. Thoughts about answers to the questions raised will be put a “parking lot” for presenters to consider afterward, as resolving these questions takes time and additional research or analysis.
3. There are no dumb questions or bad ideas. The first half of this session is a brainstorming exercise to generate *many* questions and ideas. Don’t hold each other or yourself back from voicing what comes to mind.
4. All ideas and voices should be treated as equals. Soliciting a variety of perspectives is critical. Ideas and opinions of frontline staff can often be more valuable for informing procurement strategy than those of senior leaders.
5. Confidentiality. RFPs are typically confidential. It is often helpful to clarify the appropriate level of confidentiality for this discussion.

Appendix C. Prompts to help participants generate feedback

Below are prompts to help participants generate three initial questions or comments about the presented procurement approach that would be useful for the procurement authors to consider.

- Does the need for this procurement match your understanding of why this good or service is required?
- How clearly has the agency defined the underlying purpose of what it seeks to buy? Is this the right objective?
- What if any concerns do you have that the approach or solution described may not be the right one?
- Are there embedded assumptions or uncertainties about which the agency may be overly confident?
- Where might the agency be limiting opportunities for innovative or unexpected solutions?
- Where might a respondent unfamiliar with your agency be confused? What else might constrain new potential contractors from bidding?

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