

## Focus group guide

This guide provides tips and examples on conducting a focus group to help you further understand themes that emerged in your survey results.

### Purpose of a focus group

Focus groups are a good way to consult with and collect information from your workforce about their perceptions of work health and safety (WHS). Following the results from your Safety capability survey, focus groups allow you to:

- establish a safe and open environment for workers to express their views about the survey results
- obtain more detailed information and insight into safety capability at the workplace
- better understand worker opinions and perceptions about issues in the workplace
- generate strategies and solutions to improve safety and recovery and return to work (RRTW) capability.

### Preparing for a focus group

Planning will help you obtain accurate and practical information from your participants. When planning your focus group, consider the size, composition, duration, location, and structure.

#### Size

A focus group needs to be large enough to generate ideas, but not so big that participants feel unable to contribute to the discussion due to the size of the group. If the group is too small, there can be less energy and a lack of diversity in experiences. The ideal size for a focus group is between six to 12 participants. The facilitator may find it difficult to manage the time and group dynamics in larger groups. In this instance, you may like to consider facilitating multiple smaller groups.

#### Structure and getting people to attend

Focus groups designed to understand and explore survey responses benefit from diverse WHS perspectives and experiences. Generally, participants do not need to be from specific teams, workgroups, or organisational units. However, for the best result you should consider your topic and the issues being explored when you invite and select participants.

If the focus group intends to explore topics such as supervisor support, monitoring worker safety behaviours and improving leadership skills, line managers and team leaders may be the most appropriate participants.

People generally attend focus groups because they are interested in the topic. If interest is low, it may be useful to emphasise the benefits of participating or offer incentives.

## Duration

The duration of a focus group depends on the topic and issues to be explored. However, the ideal time is generally 60–90 minutes. Shorter sessions may not allow time to delve into issues in a meaningful way. Conversely, if sessions are too long, participants may become fatigued or bored and withdraw from conversation. Participants should be asked to arrive five to 10 minutes prior to the session to get settled and enable the best use of time.

## Conducting a focus group

The following considerations will help to manage your focus group and ensure the best possible input from participants.

### Facilitators

The facilitator should be external to the team, who can remain objective and refrain from influencing the discussion or outcomes (e.g., a representative from human resources, a manager or senior worker from another team, or an external consultant).

The facilitator needs to have good observation and listening skills. They play a key role in:

- setting ground rules for group behaviour
- managing time
- ensuring all questions are covered
- managing group dynamics and any conflicts or disagreements
- ensuring each participant has the opportunity to speak
- keeping the discussion on topic
- reassuring participants that their confidentiality will be maintained
- providing appropriate feedback to management.

A scribe is recommended in addition to a facilitator so that the information and content are recorded in writing, and the facilitator can focus on the questions and team dynamics. As soon as possible after the focus group, the facilitator should take time to reflect on the session and make their own written notes.

### Resources and preparation

The facilitator should have a good understanding of the safety capability model and the organisation's results as they apply to this framework. It is recommended they keep the information flyer and results summary available, should questions arise about the survey during the session.

# Structure and format

## Pework

Consider if there is any prework participants need to complete prior to a focus group.

For pre-work, you could ask participants to review the Safety capability survey report and make notes on focus areas for improvement.

## Introduction

The facilitator should introduce the session, purpose and expected outcomes. Participants should be given a brief recap of results to ensure everyone starts the session with the same level of knowledge.

The facilitator should also set expectations and ground rules for how the focus group will be run.

- As a courtesy to all participants and to limit distractions, ask participants to please switch-off or turn to silent all mobile phones and other devices.
- Let participants know there are no right or wrong answers and it's important to respect everyone's views. While it's ok to disagree in a respectful manner, it's counterproductive to criticise, or put down another person for expressing their views. One way to do this is to use "I" statements, where you say, "I hear what you are saying, but I think", rather than, "you're wrong"
- Remind participants to not interrupt someone while they are speaking, to ensure all participants can contribute equally and feel heard and respected.
- Inform participants that finger pointing, and blaming is to be avoided; we are here to address the issue, not an individual.

## Confidentiality

The facilitator should inform participants that their responses will be documented, but that their names won't be recorded in relation to specific issues or direct quotes, or reports arising from the focus groups. The facilitator should explain to participants how the focus group data will be used and with who it will be shared.

Participants should respect the feedback provided by their fellow participants and should be reminded not to attribute comments to individuals, made during the focus group, outside of the session.

## Questioning

Asking questions is the most important tool the focus group facilitator can use to obtain information from participants. The facilitator should prepare a list of questions prior to the focus group. The questions should be open-ended and general to encourage involvement, before moving towards more specific questions. Examples of the types of questions that are effective in focus groups:

### Engagement questions

These questions seek factual responses and are non-threatening. They can also be good icebreakers to get people talking. For example:

- Has anyone participated in a focus group before?
- How was the experience for you?
- What worked well or not so well?

### Exploration questions

These questions are an opportunity to get more specific information, introduce dedicated questions, and explore survey results in more detail. Suggestions for each focus area are:

#### Safety capability report

- Do you feel the report accurately reflects your experiences at the workplace and why?
- Which report findings do you find surprising and why?

#### Organisational safety prioritisation

- The report indicates that organisational safety prioritisation is high. What tells you that safety is important within your workplace? Are there situations where you feel safety is not important?

#### Organisational safety resources and training

- What type of training would improve your ability to perform your work safely and why?
- Have there been any gaps in your WHS training?

#### Organisational safety communication and change management

- The report has identified communication and change management as an area for improvement. Reflecting on recent organisational changes, what do you think some of the reasons for this might be?

#### Social support for safety

- How could your team better support your WHS?

#### Team coordination and shared understanding

- Can you tell me more about your experiences working in a team?

#### Team climate to speak up

- Have you ever wanted to speak up about a WHS matter? Did you? If not, why not?
- How can managers better support their team members to speak up?

#### Worker safety promotion and participation

- How would you describe co-workers' attitudes to safety?
- Can you explain your own safety goals? Your employer's safety goals?

#### Worker mindful compliance

- How could we improve worker engagement?
- How easy is it to work safely here and why?

#### Worker mistake-oriented proactivity and error management

- How much attention should be paid to safety in your job and why?
- Would you recommend the company as a safe place to work? If so, why?

#### Involvement in RRTW planning

- If you were to sustain a work-related injury or illness, would you feel supported by the organisation to recover and return to work?

#### Process clarity

- If you were to sustain a work-related injury or illness, what action would you take?
- What are the components of or steps in your organisation's RRTW process?

#### Injury and illness stigma

- The report has identified injury and illness stigma as an area for improvement. What form does stigma or negativity take, in your experience?
- If you were returning to work after an injury or illness, how would your co-workers respond?

#### Supervisor support

- What can supervisors do to better support workers who are injured or ill?

#### Help-seeking willingness

- What support is available to workers who become injured or ill? Is this accessible?
- What would prevent you from seeking help if you were to become injured or ill?

### Questions to avoid

Leading questions give direction and the desired answer, for example:

- So, do you agree that...?
- How bad was it that...?
- Management did..., didn't they?
- Would you say that...?

Value-laden questions with emotionally charged words, for example:

- Should staff be forced to...?
- Should managers demand...?

Double-barreled questions with two potential responses, for example:

- Have you ever... and what was it like?

Examples of emotionally charged words include blame, claim, demand, fair, ignore, force, coerce, insist, unreasonable, unhelpful, and purport.

### Exit questions

These questions help to ensure the facilitator has not missed important issues and that all participants have had their say. For example:

- Does anybody have anything else to add?
- Have I missed any key issues you would like to discuss?

### Tips for engagement

Offer multiple ways for participants to engage in sharing their views and answering questions. For example:

- Provide materials such as notepads, pens, butchers paper or sticky notes so they can write down their ideas for group discussions and make notes.
- Break into smaller groups or pairs for discussion, then share the main points with the group.
- If conducting an online focus group, consider using tools such as collaborative 'whiteboards' or 'raise hand' functions.

If one person is dominating the conversation, encourage others to join in by:

- nodding at other individuals who look as if they also wish to speak
- asking if anyone else has the same or a different comment to make
- asking individuals if there is anything they would like to add.

Consider taking a five-minute break if you notice fatigue among participants.

### Summary and conclusions

Thank participants for their contributions and advise how and when the focus group results will be relayed to their employer.

### Analysing and reporting data

The scribe should transcribe the data as soon as possible after each focus group to ensure that important information is not forgotten. The facilitator should record their notes to discuss them with the scribe to ensure they agree on the content. The entire focus group doesn't need to be recorded verbatim; however, it is useful if 'quotes' are collected.

### Example: Organizing the data

Participant code	Participant comments	Category	Sub-category
Can you tell me more about safety behaviours in your work teams?			
P1	New employers watch and learn from more experienced employees about what is safe.	Training	Informal
P2	We learn the proper way to perform work from annual training.	Training	Formal

### Analyse the data

Read through the entire spreadsheet to get a feel for the issues. Be on the lookout for common categories, themes, and patterns, as well as unexpected comments or surprises. You should decide on the common themes and sort these into the most/least issues, common expressions, and patterns.

### Report presentation

When discussing results with management, the best approach is to summarise the categories and provide commentary and justification where required. Adding quotes can add value, however, any comments or quotes used should not be able to be traced back to a worker. If several focus groups are conducted across departments or workgroups, it is worthwhile to compare the results across different focus groups to identify patterns.

When discussing results with workers, it is recommended the final report is presented at a face-to-face meeting and focuses on the survey and focus group results. The data should be summarised and discussed, based on categories selected.

Surveys and focus groups will lose credibility and meaning if participants:

- see no results for their efforts
- see no action from results.

### Action plan

An action plan is a useful way to bring all the information together from the Safety capability survey and subsequent focus group sessions, to guide future actions.

It is a collaborative process that describes the steps that managers and workers will complete to help maximise the success of the proposed intervention. The plan should include specific actions to be undertaken and who will be actioning them, timeframes, and monitoring and review processes that will evaluate the effectiveness of the plan.



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