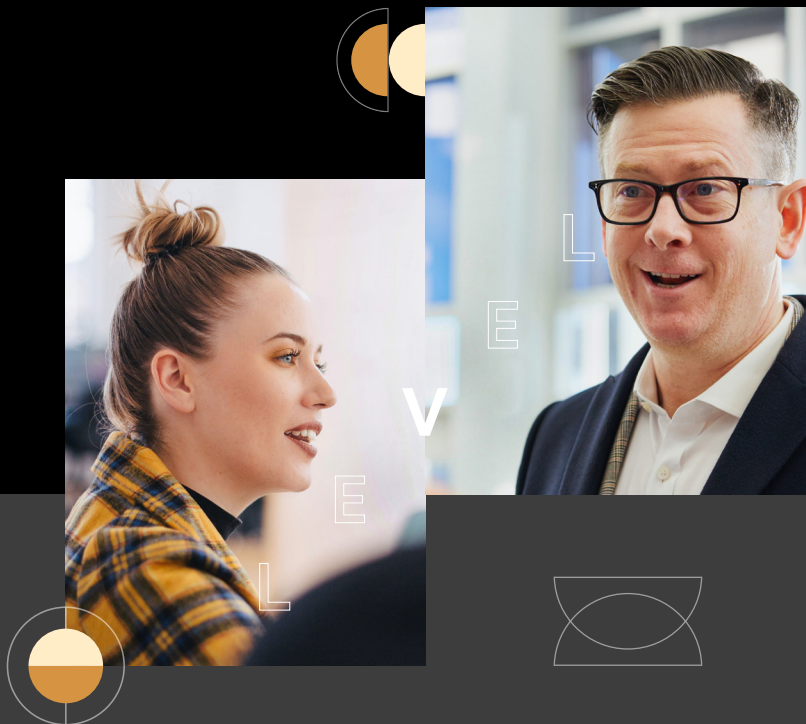


Using Focus Groups to Assess Employee Perceptions

The Level Project



Accelerate Equality. Accelerate Success.

What's included?

This document provides you with a framework to use to conduct focus groups in your organisation. Focus groups are a key tool for the engagement of a subset of employees to bridge the gap between senior leader perceptions and the reality of the workplace.

Introduction

Focus groups are an opportunity to gather input from employees across your company and provide them with a safe space to share their experiences and learn from one another. The purpose of the sessions is to gather insight from women in your business to inform your future action plan and identify their perceptions of career drivers and barriers in your company. Focus groups need to be created to foster an open atmosphere for those participating.

Why are you running focus groups?

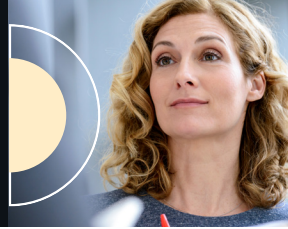
Start by agreeing the purpose/goal of the sessions with your senior team in advance and prepare/share/agree a timeline for running the sessions, sharing the output and determining next steps. Agreeing this upfront will allow you to share this information with participants and avoid questions or frustration after the sessions if obvious action based on their input is not demonstrated.

Who facilitates the focus groups?

These groups can be facilitated by a number of different people, and each will have advantages and disadvantages – as illustrated below. This will be your first decision. Regardless of who is selected, the role of the facilitator is to remain neutral and keep the session on track and focused on the purpose and goal of the session.

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Facilitator	Pros	Cons
Senior Leader¹	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Lends credibility to the process and illustrates that senior management are taking the process seriously• Allows senior leaders to hear employee experiences first-hand	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• May not encourage free exchange from participants due to hierarchical culture• Can be challenging for the senior leader to remain in “listen only” mode and not to be immediately defensive of previous practices
Human Resources professional	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Where one is in place, the HR professional is best placed to implement feedback• Typically, HR professionals have previous experience of facilitating meetings and are able to prompt the discussion	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• As with the senior leader, the HR professional may find it challenging to remain in “listen only” mode and not to be immediately defensive of previous practices, especially if they have been responsible for implementing those practices
External professional	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• External professionals have experience in facilitating similar meetings• As an external person, they are more likely to get open and frank feedback from participants	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• External people are not aware of any organisational context• While practice would suggest that they provide a report following the focus groups, the organisation does not retain the direct knowledge of what was shared in the groups

¹ If you do select the senior leader as facilitator, ensure that participants are not in the direct reporting line of that leader to ensure a more candid conversation



Who participates in the focus groups?

A facilitated group will work best with approximately 15 participants. The group can be virtual or in person, however, mixing virtual and in-person in the one meeting is not recommended as it does not offer an equitable platform for discussion. You should also run more than one focus group so that you can get insight from multiple sources – this will allow you to identify themes.

When identifying participants for the group consider the following:

1. Who is it most important to get input from?

For example, if your data analysis has highlighted that representation of women drops off at first-time manager level, then this may be the most important group for such a discussion.

2. Who is it important to include?

You may also want to consider input from other groups such as the men in the senior levels and women from a cross section of the organisation. Key at this point is ensuring that employees feel that their voice has been heard so run enough groups to receive input from a cross-section of the company.

Invitations

Make clear the purpose of the session in your invitation – clearly outline the goals beyond gathering their feedback and link it to an ongoing programme of activity. For example:

“To gather, discuss and capture themes to inform our ongoing efforts to enhance the progression of women in our organisation.”

Include language to reassure participants that what is said in the session is confidential and will not be shared, beyond key themes, with a broader audience. For example:

“All discussion within the session will be under Chatham House Rule² and we will only record broad themes from the session and not detailed quotes or individually identifiable input.”

You will need to choose someone to take notes from the session and make their role clear to participants.

Running the session

- Allow time for some informal networking before beginning the session, perhaps by providing refreshments and encouraging the group to mix and get to know each other.

² www.chathamhouse.org

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- Share with the participants:
 - The purpose/goal of the session
 - The agenda³
 - How the discussion will be captured
 - Your role and the role of the note-taker
 - Who will hear the output from the sessions and how that will be provided
- Share and agree the session's "ground rules", inviting the participants to add to the guidance if they choose. For example:
 - Ignore the phone if you can
 - Respect the confidentiality of everyone in the group
 - Listen actively and respectfully to everyone
 - Assume best intentions when others speak
 - Disagreement and differences of opinion are good
 - Be present and try to keep your cameras on [virtual only]
 - Suspend hierarchy for the duration [mixed group only]
 - Anything you would like to add...
- Get people talking within the first few minutes of the session either by giving them a first question to discuss in pairs or by getting them to introduce themselves to the group.

Finishing the session

- Thank everyone for their contributions
- Share the next steps including the timeline in which they will hear more

After the session

- Capture output from the sessions soon afterwards and collate the input from across the groups
- Meet with the senior leadership team to report the output in a timely manner
- Report back to the participants, thanking them again for contributing and detailing what actions will be considered as a result of the sessions
- Report to all employees on the sessions and ongoing plans to leverage the information gathered

³ See appendix for sample agenda



Appendix

Sample Agenda

Agenda

XX:00 – XX:20	Networking to allow participants to meet each other
XX:20 – XX:30	Group introductions Purpose Ground Rules
XX:30-XX:00	Discussion takes place Sample questions: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Our data tells us that the representation of women falls off at a certain point – why do you think that is?• Are there things we could be doing to support women's careers in our company?• If you were in charge, what would you do tomorrow to drive progress for women?• Have you encountered barriers to your progression?