

Smart guide

Energize your focus groups

7 exercises to increase participation





7 exercises to increase participation in your next focus group

Most employees already spend too much time in boring meetings. So the last thing they want to do is sit through a static focus group, listening to their colleagues answer a series of dull questions.

For your next employee focus group project, don't follow the same low-energy routine. Instead, kick it up by making the session fresher, livelier and more fun. How? By designing interactive exercises that give participants a chance to play a little.

By doing so, you'll not only get people involved, you'll also gain richer insights.

Here are seven exercises that will amp up the energy in the room. We've also included tips for using these exercises during web-based (virtual) focus groups. No sweatbands or barbells are necessary!



PARTICIPATION IS THE ANSWER

Exercises are a great way to encourage participation when employees:

- Are introverted or shy
- Don't speak the language of the moderator very well
- Are reluctant to appear critical or challenging
- Get distracted easily
- Feel nervous about giving "the right answer"



TIP

An in-depth perspective

Focus groups allow thorough exploration of an issue. They are great for:

- ✓ Clarifying survey results
- ✓ Generating ideas
- ✓ Assessing levels of knowledge
- ✓ Getting a fresh perspective
- ✓ Interpreting facts

1

Word association or sentence completion

How it works

Ask employees to finish a sentence or freely associate about a topic.

Use this tactic at the beginning of a session to get participants used to speaking up in front of each other. It's also a great way to inject a little fun or add an energy boost to the middle of a session.

Virtual tip

Taking it outside

To perform this exercise in a virtual focus group, share words or phrases using PowerPoint® slides or a “white board” and ask employees to respond using chat/instant messaging or call on them verbally.

TIP

Practice makes perfect

Test your exercise with a small group of colleagues before you start a focus group. The trial run will help you get the kinks out of the exercise.



EXAMPLE

Your company has recently launched a new wellness program and employee participation has been low. You want to find out why employees are not enrolling in the program.

Tell participants...

I'll say a word, and I want you to write down the first word that comes to mind on the provided Post-it® note. Wellness...health...nutrition...exercise...

or...

I'll start a sentence and I want you to finish it. When I think of the word Wellness, I think of: _____.

Collect and stick the Post-it Notes on a board or wall that is viewable to everyone.

Let's talk about why you answered the way you did.



2 Short survey

How it works

Distribute a short survey and ask participants to circle an answer or fill in a blank.

Consider using this tactic as a warm-up exercise or to transition to a new topic. Surveys are a low-risk way to get the conversation flowing, especially if participants are not used to speaking up in front of others or sharing their opinions.

Virtual tip

Long-distance training

If you use this exercise in a web-based session, share the survey as a PowerPoint slide and ask employees to respond using web polling or instant messaging.

TIP

Prepare your follow-up questions

Follow-up or supporting questions are used to explore a topic in more detail. They help draw out more information if participants don't bring up the issue first.



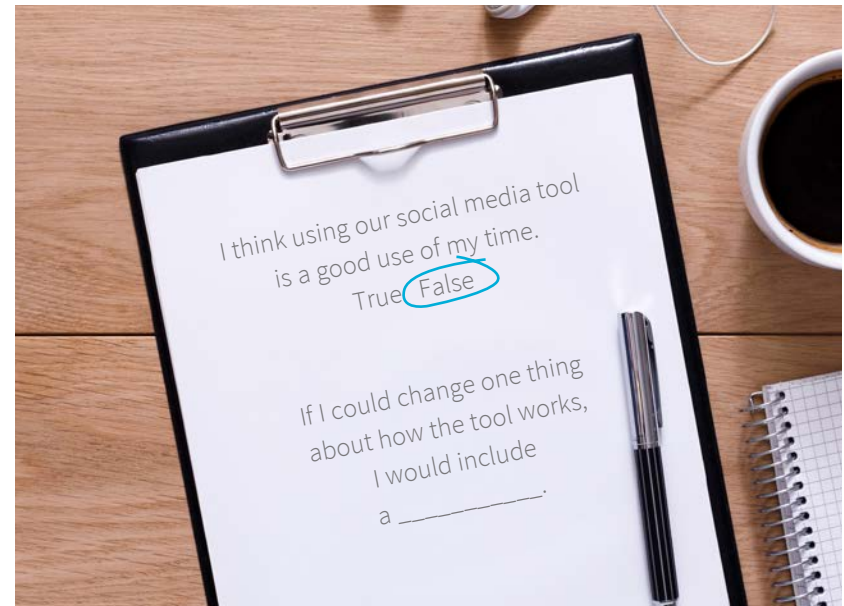
Main question: *Is using our social media tool a good use of your time?*

Follow-up questions: *What makes it useful? Why isn't it useful? What would make it more valuable?*

EXAMPLE

You want to find out if employees are using the new social media tool you've recently implemented. Give each participant a paper survey and a pen, and tell them they have five minutes.

Ask participants to share their answers and talk about the reasons behind their responses to gather in-depth information about the topic. You may also want to collect the surveys at the end of your discussion.



3 Drawing

How it works

Think Pictionary™!

Use this tactic to explore a topic in great detail. Ask employees to draw a picture of a daily work challenge or a desired goal. The illustrations will provide a clear picture of the problem, such as missing tools, steps or knowledge. Keep in mind this exercise usually requires a large time investment, so plan your agenda accordingly.

Virtual tip

Exercise wisely

This exercise is not appropriate for web-based focus groups.

TIP

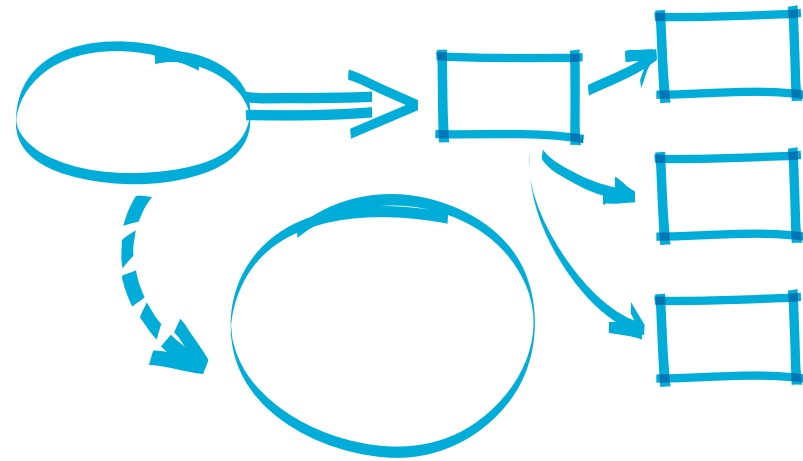


Need a spotter?

If you have participants who are shy and not used to sharing opinions in the workplace, ask them to partner or work in teams to do an exercise.

EXAMPLE

You're redesigning your intranet and would like to know how employees are using the current site, and what they would do to make it more user-friendly.



Group employees in teams of two or three, and give each team a blank piece of paper and markers. Ask each team to draw a picture that illustrates how they currently navigate to the forms and policies they use most. Then, ask them to edit the picture to show you how they might do it more efficiently.

Post the drawings on the wall and invite teams to explain their work. If time allows, invite others to provide feedback.

4 Grouping

How it works

Instruct employees to sort a series of words, pictures or ideas into categories.

This hands-on activity is a fun way to get participants focused by asking them to solve a challenge. Similar to putting a puzzle together, this exercise calls for participants to move words around as they think about the grouping that makes the most sense to them.

Virtual tip

Exercise wisely

This exercise is not appropriate for web-based focus groups.

TIP

Watch the time

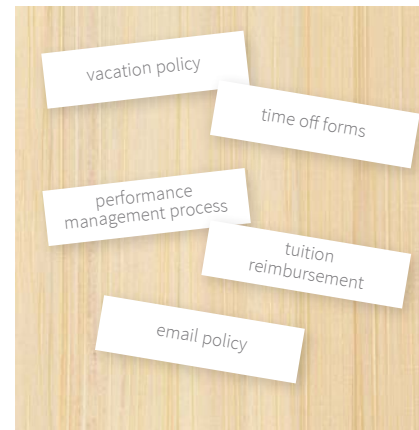
While an exercise can be terrific for getting to the heart of issues, it can also be time consuming. A complex exercise can take 20 minutes or more. Since most focus groups are only scheduled to last one hour, the value of the exercise should be weighed against the time it will take.



The cards on the table are topics to be included in our new employee handbook. Please sort the cards into groups as you would expect to find them in the handbook.

EXAMPLE

You're redesigning your employee handbook and would like to reorganize the content to make it easier for employees to find the information they need.



Once participants are done sorting, ask them to explain why they made their selections. This is also a good time to explore if there are any topics missing from the list.

5 Voting

How it works

Ask participants to demonstrate their preferences by a show of hands or voting with stickers.

If you're looking for a quick and easy exercise, voting is for you. Use this tactic to get the pulse of opinions in the group before jumping into a topic.

Virtual tip

Vote for it!

In a web-based focus group, use a PowerPoint slide for each question and ask employees to respond using web-polling or instant messaging.

TIP

Get physical

To give your focus group a boost of energy, create an exercise that requires employees to get out of their seats. For example, ask them to vote with stickers on topics posted on a board.



EXAMPLE

You're re-evaluating your internal communication program and want to find out which communication vehicles employees prefer.

Put a sticker next to the vehicle you find most useful.



Use the results from the voting exercise to ask the participants why they find selected vehicles useful.

6 Scenarios

How it works

Present a semi-fictional situation and ask participants how they would handle it.

Use this tactic when employees are reluctant to criticize. Participants are more willing to offer advice on solving an issue when it's a fictional situation.

Virtual tip

Exercises everyone can do

This approach works well in a web-based session. After you've shared your scenario, call on employees by name and ask how they would solve the problem.

TIP

Staying trim

There's no right number, but you don't want to overload your agenda with too many exercises. As a rule of thumb, use one exercise per focus group. But if you have a challenging participant group, it may be necessary to include more than one to keep the conversation flowing.



EXAMPLE

The survey from last year's employee meeting showed that attendees were dissatisfied, and you've been tasked with planning this year's meeting.

Our job is to help Mary who is planning the upcoming employee meeting.

*What topics should she include on the agenda?
What information do employees want to hear?*



After a few participants offer recommendations, ask them to explain why.

7 Storytelling

How it works

Ask participants to talk about a past experience or give a personal example.

Use this exercise when you want to understand how employees feel or what they believe. Storytelling helps shed light on why people have certain opinions or perceptions.

Virtual tip

Going the distance

To use this tactic in a web-based focus group, call on employees by name and ask them to share an experience they've had or have heard about from a co-worker.

TIP

Arrange for recording or note taking

With all of the responsibilities of a moderator, it's difficult to remember every nuance of a focus group. That's where audio recording comes in. If you are unable to record the session, ask a second person to take notes so you can focus completely on what each person is saying. Whether you record or take notes, you'll have the data you need to add colorful verbatims to your report.



EXAMPLE

Your objective is to discover ways to improve the benefits enrollment process.

Ask employees to divide into small groups and meet at separate tables. Give each group five minutes to discuss what they struggled with most during your last open enrollment period.

Go around the room giving each table the opportunity to talk about what they discussed. Use follow-up questions to dig deeper into their stories.





So many exercises, so little time

Most in-person focus groups run about 60 to 90 minutes. Think carefully about what you want to accomplish—such as creating some energy for your post-lunch crowd or exploring a complicated topic—and how much time you can devote to exercises. Here’s an at-a-glance guide to help:

Use this exercise when you need to...

| | Warm up participants | Boost energy | Boost energy but have limited time | Transition to a new topic | Explore a topic in detail or discuss a delicate topic | Understand beliefs or feelings |
|---|----------------------|--------------|------------------------------------|---------------------------|---|--------------------------------|
| Word association or sentence completion | ✓ | ✓ | | | | ✓ |
| Short survey | ✓ | | | ✓ | | |
| Drawing | | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Grouping | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | | |
| Voting | | ✓ | ✓ | | | |
| Scenarios | | | | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Storytelling | | | | | ✓ | ✓ |



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We're Davis & Company, the employee communication experts. Since 1984, leading organizations have depended on us to reach, engage and motivate their employees. Our strategic mindset, creative spirit and practical know-how can solve your toughest communication challenges. Give us a call. We'd love to help.

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Take focus groups above and beyond

We can help you create exercises that:

- Construct a perfect ice breaker
- Get the conversation flowing
- Explore a topic in great detail
- Use the correct exercise for the right situation
- Engage participants

5 things to know about us



Global. We've created communication programs that reach employees across the world, in nearly every continent (but not, we admit, Antarctica).



Experienced. We have decades of experience in communicating change, initiatives, HR programs and policies, and many other topics.



Collaborative. Our favorite way of working is to meet with our clients and put our heads together.



Client-focused. Our mission is to help you solve your problems. To set you up for success. To make sure you get the recognition you deserve. (We think you get the picture.)



Acclaimed. We've won hundreds of awards and routinely earn the praise of clients and colleagues.