



Collecting Qualitative Data on Workplace Culture

Insights to Action is a suite of resources meant to help state and local public health agencies improve recruitment and retention by acting on their data from the Public Health Workforce Interests and Needs Survey (PH WINS). Find more tools like this at <http://debeaumont.org/programs/insights-to-action/>.

Qualitative data (such as interviews or focus groups) is often used to provide color or clarity to quantitative data (such as surveys). In this case, qualitative data will be used to ask the “why” or “how” questions to understand the drivers behind your employee’s perspectives on workplace culture. While this resource is designed to supplement your department’s Public Health Workforce Interests and Needs Survey (PH WINS) results, it can also be used as a standalone tool to uncover areas for improvement in your workplace culture. The following guide provides the necessary knowledge, decisions, and tools needed to administer a focus group - or a guided discussion - amongst your staff and to analyze the results to create actionable and achievable strategies to improve your workplace culture.

Steps to Conduct a Focus Group

- Step 1: Define and Prioritize Areas of Focus
- Step 2: Recruit Participants
- Step 3: Prepare Materials
- Step 4: Conduct your Focus Group
- Step 5: Analyze the Data
- Step 6: Translate the Findings into Action

The Public Health Workforce Interests and Needs Survey (PH WINS), conducted in 2014, 2017, 2021, and 2024, supports the government public health workforce by measuring strengths and gaps to inform future investments in funding, training, recruitment, and retention.



Insights to Action is a suite of resources meant to help state and local public health agencies improve recruitment and retention by acting on their PH WINS data.

Step 1: Define and Prioritize Themes and Goals

Before conducting your focus group, it is essential to define and prioritize your themes and goals of inquiry. Clarifying what you want to achieve will determine how you create your focus group guide, help you stay true to your goals, and enable you to tell participants how results will be used and shared back with them. This is also the time to thoughtfully choose a facilitator; your goal is for participants to trust in the process and to create conditions that encourage them to be open during the focus group.

When thinking about workplace culture, six vital topics are:

- Ability to thrive at work
- Satisfaction with team and organization
- Sense of belonging
- Mental and emotional well-being
- Level of burnout
- Needs and wants in relation to policies and practices that can support well-being

If your health department participated in PH WINS 2024 and you have not yet reviewed the measures associated with these themes, please do so while working your way through this guide. Understanding your PH WINS data will help you determine where to prioritize.

If your health department did not participate in PH WINS 2024, use existing data or your best judgement to prioritize.

The following table shows which PH WINS measures are associated with each theme.

Theme	Corresponding PH WINS Measure
Ability to thrive at work	Question #9: Please rate your level of agreement with the following items <ul style="list-style-type: none">• I love my job• I can achieve a healthy balance between my work and life outside of work• I can voice concerns at work without getting into trouble• I am treated fairly at work• I feel psychologically safe at work
Satisfaction with team and organization	Question #10: Please rate your level of agreement with the following items <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Satisfaction with work unit• Satisfaction with organization

Theme	Corresponding PH WINS Measure
Satisfaction with team and organization	<p>Questions #17 and #17a: Please select the most important reason(s) why you are staying at/leaving your organization</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organizational climate/culture • Support from coworkers • Acknowledgement and recognition for your work
Sense of belonging	<p>Question #12: Please rate your level of agreement with the following items</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I feel a sense of belonging within my work unit • I feel a sense of belonging at my agency
Mental and emotional well-being	<p>Question #14: In general, how would you rate your mental or emotional health?</p>
Level of burnout	<p>Question #15: Burnout is a state of physical, mental, and emotional exhaustion caused by excessive stress, particularly in the workplace. It is characterized by a range of symptoms including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Physical symptoms: exhaustion, fatigue, or headaches • Mental symptoms: depression, excessive worrying, or frustration • Behavioral symptoms: short temper or quiet quitting <p>Based on the definition of burnout provided above, how would you describe your current level of burnout?</p>
Needs and wants in relation to policies and practices that can support well-being	<p>Question #26: Please rate your level of agreement with the following items</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I feel comfortable using my paid time off. • I am able to complete my work within my normal working hours (e.g., 40 hours/week for full time employees). • I have to take on responsibilities outside of my job description. • My agency implements policies and practices that support my mental wellbeing.

Step 2: Recruit Participants

Choosing participants for your focus group is just as important as the questions you ask. It is essential for participants to come from across the organization because workplace culture can differ greatly across different subsets of employees. You also may consider hosting different focus groups for different subsets of your workforce; for example, hosting one focus group with only non-supervisory staff and a second with supervisors and managers. This could create a safer environment for non-supervisory staff and yield insights that may differ among these groups. Finally, make sure you provide clear expectations and instructions when inviting participants.

Step 3: Prepare Materials

Prepare the following materials prior to conducting your focus group:

- Sign-in sheet
 - Notepads and pens for participants, if needed
 - Audio or video recording device (with consent)
 - Scribe or transcription software
 - Copies of ground rules and consent forms, if applicable
 - Copy of your focus group guide
 - Exit paper with any next steps, if applicable
 - An incentive and/or snacks (not required, but can go a long way in making participants feel valued)
-

Step 4: Conduct your Focus Group

Use this information as a starting point for developing your focus group guide. To allow time to discuss all six themes, we recommend scheduling a 90-minute session and prioritizing some of the probe questions. To host a 60-minute session, pick three themes at most.

Facilitator Notes

- Observe body language and group dynamics.
- Probe for elaboration where needed (e.g., “Can you tell me more about that?” Or “Can you give me an example?”).
- Ensure all participants have an opportunity to speak.
- Maintain neutrality and avoid leading questions.
- Practice active listening to summarize comments for the larger group and check your own understanding (e.g. “What I hear you saying is...”)

Introduction

1. Welcome and Purpose

- Welcome participants and thank them for joining.
- Explain the purpose of the focus group: "We are here to learn about your experiences and perspectives on our workplace culture. Your insights will help us understand what works well and what could be improved."
- Explicitly ask employees to reflect on their entire time working in the health department, not just their current positions. "As you consider your experience working in [insert organization], please consider all roles you've held and projects you've worked on, not just your current role or project."

2. Ground Rules

- Participation is voluntary, and you can skip any questions or leave at any time.
- There are no right or wrong answers; we value all perspectives.
- Respect confidentiality: what is shared here stays here.
- Speak one at a time and allow everyone a chance to contribute.

Start Recording (with consent)

3. Introductions

- Ask participants to introduce themselves with their name, current role, and how long they have worked in the organization.

Warm-Up Questions (pick one)

- "What does 'workplace culture' mean to you?"
- "When you think about your health department, what words or images come to mind?"

Consider jotting down the answers and sharing them back with participants in the form of a word cloud or other visual.

Core Questions

1. Ability to Thrive at Work

- Thinking about your time at the health department, what does it mean to you to "thrive at work"?
Probe: Can you give an example of a time you felt that you were thriving at work? What contributed to that?
- What factors in your workplace help you feel supported in the workplace so that you can thrive?
Probe: We understand thriving at work to be connected to job satisfaction, work-life balance, psychological safety, and fairness. How, if at all, are these factors associated with your ability to thrive at work?
Probe: Are there specific tools, supports, resources, or relationships that help you thrive?
- What factors hinder your ability to thrive at the health department?

2. Satisfaction with Team and Organization

First, I'm going to ask you some questions about working on your team. By "team" I mean... [please define team based on your organization's structure and/or your goal with this set of questions]

- How satisfied are you with your team's dynamic and collaboration?

Probe: Can you share a time when your team worked especially well together? What contributed to that?

Probe: When you have encountered a challenging team dynamic, what strategies or tools have you used to solve it?

- What do you like most about working on your team?
- What are some challenges to working on your team?

Probe: Are there any ways that the organization could address these challenges?

Now, I'm going to ask you some questions about working at our organization. By "organization" I mean... [please define based on your organization's structure and/or your goal with this set of questions]

- What do you appreciate most about working in this organization?

Probe: What are the reasons you like working at this organization?

- Are there aspects of the organization that you feel could be improved?

Probe: Have there been times you have questioned staying at this organization? Can you describe that situation?

Probe: What steps do you think could be taken to address these areas?

3. Sense of Belonging

- How would you describe or define belonging as it relates to your team or our organization?

Probe: Do you believe belonging is an important aspect of our workplace culture?

Probe: How can leadership enhance efforts to create a culture of belonging?

- What are actions or practices that could help foster a stronger sense of belonging on your team?

Probe: Are there formal policies and practices that have made a difference?

Probe: Are there informal policies and practices that have made a difference?

4. Mental and Emotional Well-Being

- How would you describe a workplace environment that supports the mental and emotional well-being of its employees?

Probe: How would you describe the mental and emotional well-being of employees in your organization?

Probe: Do you notice any patterns or trends related to well-being across different teams or roles?

- What supports are currently in place to promote well-being? Are they effective?

Probe: Do you feel like you can use these resources?

Probe: What additional resources would be helpful?

Probe: Are there non-traditional or "out of the box" supports would you like to see implemented?

5. Level of Burnout

- How would you describe workplace burnout? What does it mean for you?

Probe: Are there particular scenarios (e.g., times of year, types of projects) that increase burnout or the potential for burnout?

Probe: Are there other factors that contribute to increased burnout or the potential for burnout?

- What changes at the organizational level could help reduce burnout in your workplace?

Probe: Are there changes to policies, schedules, or team practices that could help?

Probe: How could leadership address burnout concerns?

- What changes at the team level could help reduce burnout in your workplace?

Probe: Are there changes to policies, schedules, or team practices that could help?

Probe: How could leadership address burnout concerns?

6. Needs and Wants in Policies and Practices

- What policies or practices currently support your well-being at work?

Probe: What policies do you find the most impactful?

- Are there any policies, practices, or expectations that hinder your well-being at work?

Probe: Do you experience these within your team? At the organizational level?

Probe: Do you feel encouraged to take your paid time off if needed? What hinders your ability to take your paid time off?

- Are there specific changes or initiatives you would like to see to better meet your needs?

Probe: Are there policies that are underutilized or not well-communicated?

Hypothetical Scenarios

These scenarios can be used to kick off or wrap up your conversations. They are not necessary but are a great tool, if time permits.

- Imagine a new employee joins the health department. What do you think their first impression of the workplace culture would be?
- If you could implement one policy or initiative to improve well-being and workplace culture, what would it be?

Closing Questions

- Is there anything we haven't asked about that you think is important to discuss?

Wrap-Up

- Thank participants for their time and valuable insights.
- Reiterate the importance of their feedback and how it will be used.
- Provide next steps or follow-up information, if applicable.
- Collect any written feedback, if relevant.

Step 5: Analyze the Data

After the focus group(s), transcribe and analyze the session. You will want to look for common themes, patterns, and trends that emerge throughout the conversations – in qualitative data analysis these are often referred to as codes. To keep you organized, it can be helpful to create a qualitative codebook, a document that lists the codes identified in your analysis with clear definitions and examples. Don't forget to include your notes on body language and the group dynamics – that information will also provide additional insight.

As mentioned previously, it is important for focus group participants to understand how their perspectives will be used and to share results back with them. For this reason, consider sharing a memo with session participants that summarizes the key themes uncovered and the next steps for this information. This can go a long way towards making sure participants feel heard and will provide credibility if you decide to do additional focus groups on the same or other topics.

Step 6: Translate the Findings into Action

Once you've gathered all this information, you may wonder what to do next. Start by visiting the [Workplace Culture Section of Insights to Action](#).