State of Rhode Island
Division of Purchases
DEPARTMENT OF ADMINISTRATION

"Assumption Buster" Exercise – Facilitation Guide

Presenting your ideas to internal stakeholders about what you need to procure and why allows you to inform your organization and solicit feedback. The following "assumption buster" exercise explicitly asks your peers to stress-test your theories and identify areas that need more investigation or clarification. Use this exercise once you have an idea of what you want to procure, but before you've started writing the RFP.

1. Setup

Suggested time	90 minutes, minimum
Suggested number of participants	• 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.
Materials needed	• 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. A good template for this is the Needs Assessment Worksheet, which can be found at the Purchases online Agency Procurement Library.
Objectives	1. The group will uncover problematic assumptions and identify ambiguity or incomplete ideas that exist around the scope of need for this procurement. 2. The group will identify a few major questions that need to be resolved before drafting an RFP for the good or service. 3. The group will brainstorm strategies to collect information to help resolve these unresolved questions.

2. Facilitation

Time	Activity	Instructions
3 working days prior	Pre-Reading	• Presenters send a write-up of their ideas about what needs to be procured and why to the group. The Needs Assessment Worksheet, available at the Purchases online Agency Procurement Library is a useful template for this. • The group reviews this document in advance.

Before participants arrive	Setup	• Give each participant the following:
		    ○ Several sticky notes
		    ○ A marker
		    ○ A physical copy of the write-up or completed Needs Assessment Worksheet
		    ○ A copy of the “ground rules” appendix
		• Clear a whiteboard or wall (will be used to post sticky notes)

:00 – :15 (10 minutes)	Introductions & Ground Rules	• Facilitators welcome the group and lead a quick round of introductions. • Facilitators explain the “ground rules” for the session.
:15 - :25 (10 minutes)	Procurement Strategy Presentation	• The presenters spend 10 minutes highlighting the main ideas from the completed write-up or Needs Assessment Worksheet. • 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, *not* identifying outstanding questions (they will have the opportunity to voice these afterward).
:25 - :30 (5 minutes)	Generate Initial Questions	• Give everyone (including presenters) 5 minutes to write down three initial questions or comments on separate sticky notes that come to mind after hearing the presented procurement strategy. Offer the group the following questions to help guide their thinking: ○ Does the need for this procurement match your understanding of why this good or service is required?

		◦ What is the underlying problem that this procurement contributes to solving? ◦ What if any concerns do you have that the approach described may not be the right one? ◦ Where might the agency be constraining opportunities for innovative or unexpected solutions? ◦ Is anything assumed by the approach that you're not certain is actually true? ◦ Where might someone unfamiliar with your agency be confused? What would constrain new vendors from bidding?
:30 - :60 (30 minutes)	Identifying Assumptions and Information Gaps	• 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. • 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 finding *answers* rather than generating *questions*, stick it off to the side in a "parking lot."
:60 - :70 (10 minutes)	Prioritizing Questions to Answer	• 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 these big ideas: Which are the 3 most important to address before writing the RFP?

:70 - :80
(10 minutes)
	Brainstorming Strategies to Gather More Information	• The purpose of this section is to generate a couple of first steps for tackling each of the top 3 themes or questions.
		• For each priority topic, ask the group:
		    ○ “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 then decide how to incorporate that information into the procurement process?”

:80 - :90 (10 minutes)	Adjourn	• Flex time in case any sections have run over • Review any next steps with the group • Suggested next step: ○ Presenters will circulate a written update to the group for comment, once information has been gathered to answer the priority outstanding questions or themes. An updated Needs Assessment Worksheet may be a good template for this.

Appendix A.

"Assumption Buster" Exercise Ground Rules

1. <u>The group collectively owns getting this procurement right.</u> 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. <u>Discussion will be focused around questions, not answers.</u> Facilitators will keep the conversation focused on generating questions and identifying problematic 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. <u>There are no dumb questions or bad ideas.</u> 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. <u>All ideas and voices should be treated as equals.</u>
    a. 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. <u>Confidentiality</u>. RFPs are typically confidential. It is often helpful to clarify the appropriate level of confidentiality for this discussion.