Quick Read

HARVARD Kennedy School Government Performance Lab | Procurement Excellence Network

Gathering Feedback from Internal Customers via Surveys

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Feedback Is a Call to Action

Are you interested in improving how your purchasing office operates? Gathering feedback from your internal collaborators—customer departments, finance, legal, and others—can help surface bottlenecks and inefficiencies in the procurement process and enable you to better understand how these key stakeholders experience the procurement journey. Surveys can also help you track progress over time, while signaling that you are committed to continuous improvement and to building trusting relationships with collaborators.

Feedback isn't always easy to ask for, but it is a gift to receive. It requires your customer departments taking time out of their busy days, if only for a few minutes, to think about how you can improve. For customer departments to be invested enough in improving procurement operations to give you candid, actionable feedback, they need to believe it will be well-received and that it will lead to change. Surveys elicit the best feedback when the purchasing office also establishes a culture of open communication, a willingness to participate in challenging conversations in good faith, and a commitment to making change based on the feedback received.

Are you ready to engage your internal customers and elevate their perspectives? Here are ten tips to help you start developing an effective and impactful survey.

1. Be intentional about the survey's purpose.

The most effective surveys start off with the end in mind. Keeping the *what* (learning objectives) and *why* (desired outcomes) in mind will help your team include the right questions in your survey. Consider the following questions:

- Are you trying to understand the overall user experience working with your purchasing office to see if there are any widespread issues?
- Are you aware of an existing problem and your purchasing office needs additional context or wants to know how widespread the problem is?
- Do you need to assess if a certain RFP process met the needs of the department or agency?

You should have a clear idea of what you hope to learn before you move forward with designing survey questions.

2. Consider your audience carefully.

Prior to developing questions for a survey, take the time to narrowly define your audience and assess whether they will be able to tell you what you seek to learn. Having your audience in mind early on helps you to ask the right people the right questions and use language that will resonate. Consider the following questions:

- Who are the internal customers and beneficiaries of a particular process or function of the purchasing office?
- Which departments contact the purchasing office most (or least) often with questions?
- Is there a department that has expressed a specific concern with a process?
- What positions or management levels within the organization can provide the most relevant feedback?

Internal customers can be defined broadly. Any individual or department within your government that currently is (or should be) participating in any part of the procurement process can be considered your customer. To clarify your audience, reflect on instances when your team has provided guidance, service, support, or resources (either consistently or intermittently) to an internal staff member, executive, or department.

3. Survey release timing and scope should inform question design.

Identifying the timing and frequency of a survey goes hand in hand with identifying your survey's purpose and audience. Your survey could be an annual assessment, or a quick pulse check after an interaction with the purchasing office. It could also be issued before or after a major procurement. Review the following categorizations of internal surveys and determine which could be most useful:

Survey Examples	Use Cases
Annual Survey	A large scale or in-depth survey can help to diagnose major challenges in the efficiency, results, and service quality of your procurement operation to inform continuous improvement and track progress over time.
Pulse Survey	If the intention of a department is to measure any changes in customer satisfaction consistently, consider implementing a "pulse check survey" or having a survey available for internal customers to respond to at any time following interaction with the purchasing office. Typically, because the survey is administered with high frequency, the survey is short in length and the questions are static.
Pre-RFP Survey	Understanding past procurement pain points before an upcoming RFP cycle is helpful to understand what steps the government might take to avoid prior mistakes (e.g., process confusion or delays, few bids received) before commencing RFP writing.
Post-RFP Survey	Assessing the perspectives of internal stakeholders who were closely involved in the RFP process at the end of a recent RFP cycle provides insights to measure satisfaction with the number of bids or proposals received, the quality of firms responding, the final negotiated price, and customer service provided by the purchasing office.

TIPS IN PRACTICE: EXAMPLE OF A POST-RFP INTERNAL SURVEY

The Purchasing Division in the City of Long Beach, CA developed the following survey to hear from customer departments after the completion of a solicitation to gauge their satisfaction and gather feedback.

How satisfied were you with the results of the solicitation? (Likert scale: Very dissatisfied–Very satisfied)

How was your experience with the procurement process? (Rank your satisfaction for each of the following) (Likert scale: Very dissatisfied–Very satisfied):

Service: Purchasing Division staff were responsive and supported me in the process.

Transparency: I understand the solicitation process, requirements, and expected timelines.

Efficiency: There were no unreasonable delays.

Equity: I was encouraged to apply an equity lens throughout the solicitation process.

Is there any other feedback or context you would like to provide? (Open-ended)

4. Clarify what type of data would be most useful to your purchasing office.

A key component of survey design is thinking carefully about how your purchasing office will intentionally use the data from respondents. As a starting point, imagine the ideal data format your team would like to analyze in the evaluation phase.

Consider which of the following question types (each with their own advantages/disadvantages) will yield the data your team is looking for:

Response Type	Pros	Cons
Open-Ended (Free Response)	- Respondent can share opinion in their own words. - Allows deeper understanding of successes and failures through narratives or examples.	- Lengthy responses to analyze. - No uniformity in data. - Manual review required to extract key themes.

Response Type	Pros	Cons
Close-Ended (Yes/No)	- Yields structured data. - Is easy for users to quickly complete.	- Limits respondents to just two choices, while their answer might be a "maybe" or "Yes, in certain circumstances only." - Respondents cannot elaborate on feedback.
Likert Scale ("Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree")	- Is useful in measuring subjective perspectives. - Provides users with more options than a simple "yes/no" or "agree/disagree."	- Neutral responses may not provide much useful context and are difficult to interpret. - Respondents cannot elaborate on the reason for their answer.
Multiple Choice	- Faster to complete than open-ended questions. - Responses can be grouped into pre-defined themes, yielding structured data. - An "other" option with a free-response option can add opportunities for respondents to add other answers.	- Pre-populated multiple-choice options may not adequately represent all response choices respondents would like to have. - Too many choices may cause confusion or respondents being overly focused or more inclined to select the first few choices.

5. Start with the most interesting, accessible questions to capture respondent interest.

Staff in your customer departments and agencies are busy. Starting with the most important and interesting questions is a great tip to engage respondents and helps you obtain the most important information you need. Though you often want to collect demographic data or affiliation, questions like "title" or "department affiliation" can be strategically placed at the end of the survey.

Consider opening the survey with questions that will grip the survey respondent, such as:

- On a scale of 1–10, how enjoyable is it to work with the purchasing office?
- In a sentence or two, how would you describe your average experience collecting three quotes for a small dollar purchase?
- From poor to excellent, rate your experience with the Invitation to Bid process.

- If you could modify anything about our RFP process to make your experience more positive, what would you suggest?

6. Keep the content concise and user friendly.

The best surveys are clear, straightforward, and easy to navigate. Time is valuable, and respondents may be more likely to complete the survey if it appears not to take too much time. Evaluate which questions are necessary and which are nice to have. Before launching, have colleagues test your survey to make sure it doesn't take too long and to fix any issues or areas of confusion respondents report.

7. Use consistent questions to measure changes in sentiment or satisfaction over time.

Consistency in survey design is key to revealing whether satisfaction, knowledge, and behaviors are trending upward over time. By developing a core set of questions to be asked on a routine basis, your purchasing office can develop useful benchmarks and develop performance goals from the historical data collected or be well positioned to assess performance across buyers or departments.

8. Incorporate your survey into existing communications and share your appreciation.

Look for ways to incentivize your department customers to prioritize responding to your survey. These incentives could be low-cost, like a gift card or cup of coffee. They could also be free, like the "Procurement Fast Pass" Long Beach, California issues entitling the recipient to push their procurement to the front of the line for review and posting. Or perhaps the department that completes the most responses receives a special surprise. Try to gain buy-in through support from an internal "influencer" or other credible messenger who can advocate for the value of providing feedback through this survey.

Internal customers also have the added advantage of being a captive audience. Try incorporating a survey into an organization email blast or allocating time to complete during preexisting department meetings. Using standing meetings also provides an opportunity to answer questions, or immediately follow the survey with a short discussion on connected themes.

Additionally, let your audience know their opinions are valued and appreciated! Send automated "thank you" responses once the survey has been completed and share the timeline by which the purchasing office will be reviewing responses and sharing back results. If the survey is not

TIPS IN PRACTICE: USING SURVEYS TO MEASURE TRENDS OVER TIME

In addition to 6-month customer feedback surveys, the Purchasing team at the City of Tulsa, Oklahoma also developed a 5-minute feedback form that is included in all buyer correspondence. The survey is focused on assessing customer perspectives on three overarching themes: timeliness, communication, and quality. The structure of the survey questions allows for respondents to select which stage of the procurement process their feedback refers to (e.g., solicitation writing, bid evaluation, or award execution) which directly enables the purchasing department to address specific pain points over time.

Benefit: The Purchasing Director now has a mechanism to collect continual feedback that can be reviewed with the Purchasing team to identify opportunities for improvement and measure if public sentiment has trended positively over time.

Survey Questions:

What stage of the procurement process are you currently in?

Preparing the purchase

Open purchase (bid open or quotes being collected)

Finalizing bid award or purchase

What was the quality of the service you received from the Purchasing team?

Excellent, good, average, poor, very poor

How about the time it took for Purchasing to address your department's needs?

Excellent, good, average, poor, very poor

And how was the communication and responsiveness from the Purchasing team during the procurement process?

Excellent, good, average, poor, very poor

Please use this space to follow up on the questions above and/or to share additional compliments and feedback for the Purchasing team.

Open response

anonymous, sending a personalized follow-up email to seek additional context on feedback a respondent shared demonstrates that your purchasing office is serious about enhancing the customer experience.

9. Schedule time to review feedback with key stakeholders.

Do not let the data sit on the shelf! Establish a meeting cadence that aligns with the frequency of data collection (e.g., bi-weekly, monthly, quarterly) to regularly analyze feedback and identify emerging themes and action items. You can also use this time to evaluate the survey questions to understand whether your team is asking strong questions or providing the optimal number of multiple-choice options.

10. Implement changes that address the feedback you received

Now that you've gotten feedback from your customer departments on how you can improve, act on it! Prioritize the most important and attainable changes you can make. We've seen many governments successfully take analyzed survey responses and identify which fixes to prioritize in the short, medium, and long term, which require more understanding, and which would require more resources or capacity. As you make changes, close the loop by sharing updates with internal stakeholders so that they know you're acting on their feedback, and that you recognize the importance of their opinion.

Conclusion

Soliciting feedback from the government staff who frequently work with a purchasing office is a valuable way to gather insights about what your team is doing well and where your process needs to improve. We hope this quick read has provided some useful tips about how you can start collecting, analyzing, and implementing feedback from your internal customers.

But don't forget about your external customers, either! Reaching out to vendors can provide a more complete picture of how your purchasing office performs and can help you unearth new perspectives. For more information about how to design and implement a survey for vendors, check out our how-to guide Surveying Your Vendor Community to Assess Satisfaction and Identify Pain Points.

The **Procurement Excellence Network** is an initiative of the Government Performance Lab designed to help public sector leaders use government procurement as a tool to improve resident outcomes and advance equity. The **Government Performance Lab**, housed at the Taubman Center for State and Local Government at the Harvard Kennedy School, conducts research on how governments can improve the results they achieve for their citizens. An important part of this research model involves providing hands-on technical assistance to state and local governments. Through this involvement, we gain insights into the barriers that governments face and the solutions that can overcome these barriers. By engaging current students and recent graduates in this effort, we are able to provide experiential learning as well.

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