

Running a post-election debrief workshop

Planning and facilitation guide

November 2024

This guide is for election administrators planning improvements to their election operations. At the Center for Civic Design, we believe the first step to making future improvements is to look backwards and understand current practices. This gives you an opportunity to zoom out and see bigger opportunities for improvement. Use this guide and related tools to run an interactive, information-gathering workshop with your team.

The best time to run a debrief workshop is immediately following an election. Experiences are fresh and you likely have ample runway to implement changes before the next election.

What's this guide for?

This guide will walk you through planning and running a debrief workshop. By the end of the workshop, you will have a better understanding of current successes and pain points in your election operations, as well as confidence running engaging sessions for your team.

How to use this guide?

This guide is one of 3 tools to help you plan a debrief workshop:

- **Planning and facilitation guide:** the guide you are reading now. It includes recommendations and considerations for setting goals, planning activities and logistics, running the workshop, and planning next steps.
- **Planning worksheet:** guided questions based on this guide with space to write and process your thoughts. Think of it as your working draft. [Click here for the Planning Worksheet.](#)
- **Workshop moderator guide template:** the final agenda that you will use to run your workshop. [Click here for the Workshop moderator guide template](#)

What happens next?

The final section of this guide includes wrap-up actions. These lay the groundwork for gathering and prioritizing information learned in the debrief. In early 2025, CCD will publish a follow-up guide to help you prioritize and use your learnings to plan for future improvements.

What is this guide based on?

This guide is based on interviews about planning with staff from 5 different election offices across the county, as well as our own experience running workshops.

Contents

| | |
|-----------------------------------|----|
| Setting goals for your workshop | 4 |
| Planning your workshop activities | 5 |
| Planning other workshop logistics | 14 |
| Creating the agenda | 15 |
| Post-workshop next steps | 16 |

Setting goals for your workshop

Clear goals keep you focused. They make sure you choose the right activities, invite the right attendees, and plan logistics like how much time you need and what you need to bring.

How to come up with the right goals

Start at the end. What do you want to learn by the end of your workshop? You can generate goals by completing this sentence:

By the end of the workshop, we will _____[know, understand, learn]_____

This workshop is meant to be reflective and exploratory. That means your goals will be broad.

Write your goals

We recommend no more than 3 goals for a debrief session. More than 3 is too much to juggle. Choose 3 goals for longer sessions of 2 hours. For shorter sessions, 1 to 2 goals will work best.

These are our suggestions for goals for an exploratory debrief workshop:

By the end of the workshop, we will:

- Understand problems in the voting process
- Learn what works well in the voting process

Add or adapt these goals as needed, but keep them broad and exploratory. You can also set a guiding topic, such as mail-in voting or new equipment at the polling place. Your goals would then be:

- Understand the problems with mail-in voting
- Learn what works well with our new voting machines

In the next guide, we will help you prioritize and create plans for solutions. (Coming 2025.)

Now go fill out section 1 on the worksheet

Setting goals

Planning your workshop activities

A key difference between a workshop and a meeting is using activities.

Activities create space for more people to share their thoughts, compared to a meeting where only one person speaks at a time. Activities can also prompt people to think more creatively and engage with each other in new ways.

A workshop typically has 4 main parts. Activities can be used in any of them:

- **Welcome:** time to introduce the agenda and norms (guidelines for how people should interact with each other and the content)
- **Icebreaker:** grounding activity to set the mood and get people talking
- **Main activity (or activities):** the bulk of the workshop; participants use structured activities to debrief the election
- **Closing:** come back together to reflect on the day and decide any next steps

At a minimum, this workshop should be an hour. But you can expand it to several hours, or even a full-day. If your workshop is longer than an hour, add in 5-10 minute breaks.

Below are activity ideas for each part of the workshop. You can adapt activities, or borrow techniques from one activity to use in another.

Assess your team's needs

Before picking activities for your workshop, think about your team dynamics. This will help you pick or adapt activities to increase engagement.

Group size

How many people will attend the debrief workshop?

- **Small group** – have everyone in one space working together
- **Large group** – divide into breakout groups of 3-5 people

Experience

Are there events or activities your team has done in the past that they enjoyed?

- **Past success with group activities** – reuse an activity so you can skip or shorten instructions
- **Never done a group activity like this before** – spend more time on instructions

Communication style

Are you a quiet team or a loud team?

- **Quiet team** – give alternative ways of participating such as writing on sticky notes, or giving time to speak with 1 other person first before sharing with a larger group; or spend more time on icebreakers to help transition people into a new mindset
- **Loud team** – use group discussions
 - If you have people who tend to dominate group discussion, provide guardrails such as using timers or assigning roles (e.g. breakout group leader, notetaker, timekeeper)

Now go fill out section 2 on the worksheet:

Assessing your team's needs

Choosing activities that fit your team

Welcome and norm-setting

The first 5-10 minutes of your workshop set the tone. Start by reminding people of the goals and agenda. Then introduce norms (guidelines for how people should interact with each other and the content).

If your team already has meeting norms, use them. If not, some norms we have seen work well in the past include:

- **Stay engaged** – put phones away and focus on the current conversation
- **Share the space** – if you tend to talk a lot, step back so that others can speak up
- **Tackle problems, not people** – focus on the problem being discussed, instead of criticizing people
- **Assume good intent** but take responsibility for the impact of your words – remember that everyone shares a goal of running an excellent election

After introducing the norms, give participants time to ask questions or propose new norms.

Icebreakers

Good icebreakers set you up for success. They can:

- Energize participants
- Kickstart people thinking about the workshop's main topic
- Get people who might not typically interact comfortable talking to each other (e.g. different departments or different levels of the organization)

Icebreakers can be lighthearted and help people get to know one another outside of work. Or they can get people to start thinking about what will be talked about in your workshop. If your participants do not know each other well, ask people to share their name and role during this portion of the workshop.

Plan to spend 5-15 minutes on icebreakers.

Icebreakers can be modified depending on the size of the workshop. If you are a small group, keep everyone together. If you have a lot of people, break into pairs or breakout groups of 4-5 people and assign a notetaker in each group.

Icebreaker questions

Description

Keep it simple. Ask everyone in the room to answer the same question. Set a time limit for answers if you have a large group. 30 seconds/person per question.

- Describe how you're feeling in 1 word.
- What was the first thing you told your friend/spouse/kid about the election the next day?
- You are giving out awards. What award does our office get for this election?
- What is one question you hope will be answered today?
- What's your favorite holiday meal?

Goal

Get to know one another. Gauge everyone's energy and comfort levels.

Materials

Optional: Write down responses if they are important to the main workshop topic. You can use the information later in the workshop or hold onto it to help prioritize decisions later on.

Get in line

Description

Ask a question that can be answered on a spectrum. Tell participants to move around the room based on where they fall on the spectrum.

- How do you feel this election went? (Extremely positive on right; Extremely negative on left)
- On a scale of 1-10, how prepared did you feel going into the election? (1 on right; 10 on left)
- Are you a dog person or a cat person? (Cat on right; Dog on left)

If time allows, ask participants to explain their position. Or ask what would need to change in order to move to the other side of the room. Alternatively, skip the explanations and ask several rapid-fire questions.

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| | See more variations on Global Learning Partner's activity description . |
| Goal | Get a visual snapshot of how people feel on a range of topics. Find areas of alignment or disagreement. Get people moving, especially if they have been sitting for a long time. |
| Materials | None |

Count up

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| Description | Have everyone stand in a circle. With one person speaking at a time, try to count to 20 as a group. If 2 people say the same number at the same time, start over. Do not assign numbers in advance. See the full steps on SessionLab's website . |
| Goal | Get people to focus and be conscious of not interrupting each other. |
| Materials | None |

Main Activity

The main activity should take up the bulk of your workshop. Pick activities that will help you achieve your goals.

Choose 1-2 main activities based on how long you have. If you are working through multiple goals, you might want one activity per goal. This is a nice way to break up the workshop and to get people engaged in different ways.

Each main activity should have 3 phases:

- **Instructions (5-10 minutes)** – Remember to give participants a chance to ask clarifying questions.
- **Work time (30-70 minutes)** – Run the activity. If the activity has multiple phases, break this time into smaller chunks and give instructions at each stage.
- **Share back (10-20 minutes)** – If you have breakout groups, ask each group to share highlights from their conversation with the full group. If you have a small group that

worked together on the activity, ask everyone to share a takeaway. This can also be done silently as a gallery walk if groups recorded notes on posters.

Be sure to collect notes. This could be posters or sticky notes created by participants, worksheets, or assigning someone to be a notetaker.

Timeline reflection

Description

On a whiteboard or several large sheets of paper, draw out a timeline of the last election. Include a few key dates or events.

Have team members add events, projects, or activities to the timeline. This can be done silently or while working together.

After the timeline is complete, ask participants to reflect on their individual experiences by writing wins, challenges, and lessons learned at different steps on sticky notes. Discuss as a group, and place the sticky notes on the timeline.

See a variation of this activity on [SessionLab's website](#).

Goal

Reflect on the election and create a visualization of your team's collective experience.

Materials

Whiteboard or large sheets of paper to create the timeline ;
Markers; Pens; Sticky notes

Walking brainstorm

Description

Create a list of 5-6 topics or guided questions about the election and write them on the top of poster paper. Put them up in different parts of the room.

Give each participant a stack of sticky notes. Ask them to walk around the different posters silently and write down their ideas, concerns, or questions. 1 idea per sticky note. As people write more sticky notes, they can also build on other participants' ideas in this silent activity. Or use dot stickers or draw stars to show agreement.

At the end, give people a chance to go around and read all of the notes, and share takeaways out loud.

See the full steps on [SessionLab's website](#)

| | |
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| Goal | Crowdsource and build on each other's ideas without being distracted by personality types or disagreements. |
| Materials | Flipchart paper; Markers; Sticky notes; Voting dots or stickers (optional) |

Conversation cafe

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| Description | <p>Pick a topic or guiding question for groups to discuss. Keep your initial questions broad.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Round 1: go around in a circle. Each person shares what they are thinking, feeling, or doing about the topic. (1 minute each) • Round 2: go around in a circle. Each person shares thoughts and feelings after having listened to everybody else. (1 minute each) • Round 3: open conversation (option to use talking object). 20–40 min. • Round 4: each person shares their takeaways (1 minute each) <p>Use a “speaking object” in rounds 1, 2, and 3 to ensure only 1 person speaks at a time.</p> |
| Goal | Promote active listening. |
| Materials | Timer; “Speaking object” (this could be a ball, stick, or even a marker) |

Closing activities

End the workshop with a brief closing activity. This allows participants to reflect, synthesize, and consolidate what they have learned. And this helps you as a facilitator begin thinking about what will come next after the workshop is over.

Make sure to record these to look at later. That could look like:

- Someone taking notes as everyone goes around the room to give their reflection
- Having everyone complete this as an exit slip, collecting the paper at the end.

Closing questions

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|--------------------|---|
| Description | Ask all participants to answer the same question: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• How are you feeling about today?• What is your main takeaway from this workshop?• What are you excited about for our next election? |
| Goal | Instill a sense of meaning and excitement for the future of your team. |
| Materials | Notes from the conversation or exit slips. |

I like, I wish, I wonder

| | |
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| Description | <p>Participants think about their conversations in the workshop, and complete 3 sentences:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• I like...• I wish...• I wonder... <p>There are different ways to run the activity: put poster paper on the wall for each sentence and give participants time to walk around and write their answers. Sit in a circle and people can raise their hands and say just one sentence. Ask participants to write their answers on a half sheet of paper, and turn it in as they leave the room.</p> |
| Goal | Gather thoughtful feedback framed in a constructive and positive way, avoiding a negative focus. |
| Materials | Poster paper or half-sheets of paper; Pens |

More activity ideas

If you're looking for more activity ideas, check out:

- [FunRetrospectives](#) – a database of over 100 activities for workshops
- [Hyper Island](#) – a toolbox of over 100 creative activities to get conversations flowing. The “facilitating action” ideas are a good place to start looking for inspiration! *Note: You need to create a free account.*

- [SessionLab](#) – database of over 1000 user-submitted activities. In this database, icebreakers are called “energizers.”

Prepare for potential problems

No matter which activities you choose, you should be prepared to address problems as they come up. Think about what might go wrong in each activity, and how to get the conversation back on track.

| Potential problems | Scripts |
|--|--|
| If a conversation is getting too in the weeds on one topic, help people zoom back out. | <p>“I’m going to make a note to follow up with you about this topic later. I hear how important it is to you. But right now I want to move us along to another topic.”</p> <p>Or create a parking lot – a big sheet of paper on the wall where you write down ideas that you (or other participants) want to talk about at a later date.</p> |
| If a conversation is too surface level, encourage people to go into more details. | “Tell me more!” “Can you give an example?” |
| If someone is dominating the conversation, be ready to interrupt them kindly. | “[Name] I’m going to interrupt you. Since we’re tight on time, I want to make sure we get to hear from others too.” |

Now go fill out section 3 on the worksheet:

Activities

Planning other workshop logistics

Now it's time to plan the set-up for the workshop.

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| Attendees | Who are you inviting to the workshop? |
| Roles | Do you need any assistance with facilitation or setting up the workshop? List what and who here. |
| Scheduling and Planning | Date and time for the workshop. Also, consider how long you need to prepare for the workshop. When do you need to start the ball rolling? Make sure to schedule a 15-20 minute debrief for your decision-making team after the workshop. |
| Space | What type of space do you need to conduct the debrief? Will people need room to spread out for activities or eating? What do you need in the space (e.g. whiteboard, tables, AV equipment)? |
| Atmosphere | What will create a workshop conducive to reflection and open flow of information? Can the space be made to feel inviting? |
| Materials | Based on the workshop activities you have designed, what materials will you need? Who is responsible for these? What's your plan to save the information on these materials for later? |
| Refreshments | Are you ordering food or drinks? |
| What else? | Is there anything else you need to consider or plan for? |

Now go fill out section 4 on the worksheet:

Logistics

Creating your moderator guide

For this guide, we have been asking you to follow along in the planning document as you think through your workshop. We asked you to do this because the planning document helps you flesh out ideas as you navigate facilitating a workshop.

Once you have all your ideas recorded in your planning document, it's time to clean up your notes, and write everything down in the moderator guide document.

A filled-out moderator guide document keeps you organized on the big day. It is a place for you to:

- Keep track of time
- Write notes to yourself
- Script out directions or things you do not want to forget

Some people like a sparse guide, and others like to script out everything you are going to say. You will get a feel for what the right level of information is for you.

While we are not providing a PowerPoint template in this material, you might want to have a deck for your workshop. It might be helpful to use if you have specific instructions, you want people to see in writing, or if you have visuals to show people.

Now go fill out section 5 on the worksheet:

Create your moderator guide

Post-workshop next steps

You now have a lot of information about the recent election. In early 2025, we will publish a follow-up guide to analyze and plan with all of this new information. In the meantime, set yourself up for successful planning by taking some time to organize the information you have gathered.

Make sure you have the information saved. Whether your team used sticky notes, worksheets, or someone recorded ideas, keep these items together. You will want to go through them later when planning.

Consider holding a 15 to 20-minute debrief with key decision-makers on your team. Use this time to highlight the most important information from the day. You might use this time to decide on the top 3 most important learnings from the workshop or prioritize issues to plan around.