



SECTION 2

Needs Assessment: Steps to Success

Introduction

Because most of us do not conduct needs assessments (such as those typically required to inform decisions in the workplace) each day, the steps to conducting a successful assessment can remain elusive. At the same time there is, of course, no one perfect path to success—nor should there be. Therefore, we have attempted in this section to “boil down” the theories, models, and approaches of needs assessment into clear guidance on how you can manage a successful assessment within your unique context. Along with the management tools provided in appendix A, the guidance offered in this section can start you on the path to success.¹

How Do You Determine the Scope of Your Needs Assessment?

We can break down decisions into three levels:

- *Strategic* (typically involves goals, objectives, and strategic policies defining the relationship between organizations and the society they serve)

- *Tactical* (includes the policies and procedures put in place to both support strategic decisions and guide operational decisions, thereby defining the goals and objectives of an organization or institution)
- *Operational* (includes all sorts of short- and long-term decisions that typically involve implementing projects or programs and carrying out tasks to produce results)

Needs assessments are routinely used to guide *strategic decisions*, choices that are guided by the needs of society, including the needs of direct clients (such as a government’s ministry of education), indirect clients (such as community schools served by the ministry), and others in the society that are the beneficiaries of an organization’s efforts (such as the broader population of the country or region). Although your assessment may focus on the needs of a direct client, it is important to recognize and plan for the implications that any decision you make will have on other related societal systems (such as local schools and communities).

Needs assessments also provide valuable guidance for *tactical decisions*, such as when an organization wants to determine what programs and projects should be developed to improve aid effectiveness. Here the focus is on the results of the organization itself, rather than on the contributions of the organization to clients and society. Tactical needs assessments can be used in reactive situations, such as when organizational performance suddenly begins to drift below established expectations. Equally, tactical needs assessments are frequently used proactively to determine if and when opportunities are the right choice. In each case, a needs assessment can help you collect useful information and make justifiable decisions that improve the performance (that is, the achievement of desired results) of your organization.

Operational decisions are also supported by needs assessments. These decisions focus on achieving individual and team results within your organization, and they are best made in alignment with tactical and strategic decisions. Operational decisions include the daily decisions that must be made for projects to be implemented or budgets to be used. They can be short-term decisions (for example, when deciding on the expected results from a staff meeting) or long-term decisions (for example, when setting project management objectives and milestones). In either case, operational decisions are associated with the products of individuals and teams.

Strategic, tactical, and operational decisions—though different in focus—are each essential to success (see table 2.1). Without quality operational decisions, tactical and strategic results would be not achieved. Likewise, without quality tactical decisions, strategic results would not be accom-

Table 2.1 Three Scopes for Needs Assessments

Needs assessment	Results focus	Example 1: Contexts for needs assessment	Example 2: Needs assessment results
Strategic	Results contributed to the society and communities served by the organization and its partners	Ministry officials from five neighboring provinces meet with donor agencies to review the effect of recent global economic changes on their combined populations.	Priority needs include reducing incidence of waterborne diseases and increasing farmland production. The group also indicates that multiprovince projects are preferred, when appropriate.
Tactical	Results delivered by the organization to clients	Changing population needs require more responsive development projects that work across multiple sectors (for example, education, health, agriculture, infrastructure, and so on) and that engage development partners (for example, multilateral and bilateral organizations and nongovernmental organizations).	Priority needs for the organization include increasing the effectiveness of agriculture and health projects, as well as increasing the number of multi-sector projects that are completed successfully.
Operational	Results produced by individuals and teams within the organization	Your unit within the organization has not been successful in coordinating efforts across multiple sectors in the past, and two such projects have had to be restructured in the past five years (neither being completed within the initial funding period).	The priority needs in the unit include (a) increasing the number of successfully completed multisector projects and (b) increasing the overall number of current projects that are completed on time. Mentoring new staff members, increasing feedback on draft proposals, and monitoring multisector projects biweekly were among the possible activities identified to improve performance.

Source: The framework is based on the multiple works of Roger Kaufman found in the references section, with examples provided by the authors of this book.

plished. If operational decisions are made, for instance, without links to the tactical and strategic implications, then the organization, its clients, the client's clients, and others suffer. At the same time, strategic decisions can pro-

vide guidance for subsequent tactical and operational decisions. It is, therefore, the alignment of decisions that is essential.

Many scenarios can commonly lead to needs assessments with differing scopes: strategic, tactical, operational, or all three. The following scenarios may better illustrate examples of when you would select a needs assessment with one or more of these scopes.

Example Uses of a Strategic Needs Assessment

Scenario 1: Environmental and social concerns are changing the requirements that citizens and government agencies have for your organization's products or services.

Scenario 2: Previous strategic planning efforts in your organization have not provided useful guidance for aligning the contributions of your provincial education ministry with the emerging requirements of the impoverished minority populations that you serve.

Scenario 3: Your government agency is responsible for (a) developing 20-year transportation plans for your region, (b) anticipating a range of economic and social changes, and (c) building in consultations with a range of stakeholders (for example, transportation experts, national and community officials, financial experts, and so on).

Scenario 4: New technologies are likely to make the services offered by your organization obsolete in the next five years, and you are looking for new niche markets that your organization may be able to serve in this new development environment.

Example Uses of a Tactical Needs Assessment

Scenario 1: Client satisfaction in your telecommunications organization is historically mixed, but new information is indicating that the retention of clients has decreased and has become a significant financial risk.

Scenario 2: Your transportation organization is struggling to balance workforce capacity, which has too few highly qualified road engineers some years and too many other years, thereby leading to suboptimal project planning and varying satisfaction among clients.

Scenario 3: Results in your water department have been slowly declining in recent years (for example, number of sewer lines completed, quality of water provided, and so on), and it looks as if this year will end with lower results than last year.

Scenario 4: Last year, your organization struggled with approximately 8 percent of the more than 500 employees missing work on the average day. This situation has cost the organization approximately US\$180,000 annually and has led to lower client satisfaction ratings.

Example Uses of an Operational Needs Assessment

Scenario 1: Fewer than 40 percent of project leaders in your unit have been adequately identifying emerging risks in their quarterly implementation reports, leading to 10 percent of the projects in your unit being categorized as “at risk of failure.”

Scenario 2: Each quarter, electricity department supervisors are expected to meet with their employees to discuss community scorecard ratings. But fewer than half of those meetings take place, thereby resulting in a lack of shared knowledge on community satisfaction with electricity services and where corrective action should be taken.

Scenario 3: It is expected that new employees in your pension agency will be able to accurately input applicant data into the pension management system within six months of being hired. Unfortunately, it currently takes employees 9 to 12 months of practice to enter applicant data with the necessary accuracy.

Scenario 4: According to manager evaluations, more than 60 percent of employees who complete internal training courses do not perform their jobs better after the training.

Both tactical and operational needs assessments begin and end within the organization. Each of the needs assessments relates directly to the ability of the organization and its people to accomplish their goals and objectives. In contrast, the strategic needs assessment begins outside of the organization with the direct and indirect clients that benefit from the products or services of the organization (for example, community members, students, pensioners, and so on). Those direct and indirect clients of the organization are thereby given a voice in setting the long-term direction for the organization through the strategic needs assessments.

Successful needs assessments are not, however, independent from other needs assessments. For an operational needs assessment to be of value, it must be completed within the context of a tactical needs assessment; after all, why improve performance at the individual level if it is not in line with organizational objectives? Likewise, tactical needs assessments are most useful when nested in the results of a strategic needs assessment.

Alignment is essential for success, both in terms of the decisions to be made and the actions that follow those decisions. The goals of an organization are best derived from and aligned with the goals of the broader society in which they function. Likewise, the goals of a project or team are best derived from and aligned with the goals of the organization. The importance of this alignment is, nevertheless, often overlooked, thus allowing decisions to be made—and subsequent actions to be taken—that have little or no chance of accomplishing desired results that span across operational, tactical, and strategic goals.²

Managing the scope of your needs assessment requires a sense of balance—balancing strategic, tactical, and operational decisions. At times, you may determine that your assessment requires a 90 percent focus on operational decisions, with just 10 percent of the effort focused on ensuring the links with tactical and strategic decisions. At other times, the context for your assessment may lead you to determine that 50 percent of the effort should be on organizational needs, 20 percent on alignment with societal needs, and 30 percent on alignment with individual or team needs. There is no equation for balancing scope, but rarely would you want to focus exclusively on strategic, tactical, or operational decisions—alignment of the three typically involves some attention and effort.

Where Do You Begin?

To begin any needs assessment, you must determine what decisions the assessment is meant to inform (see box 2.1). For instance, is your organization tasked with reforming education within your country, and is your primarily strategic needs assessment meant to inform those decisions? Or has your division recently undergone budget cuts and, therefore, you want to use a primarily tactical needs assessment to inform decisions on prioritizing limited resources? Or are you concerned that a team you lead is missing too many deadlines and so you want to use a primarily operational needs assessment as a basis for improving performance?

Whatever the case, let the *decisions to be made* be your guide. If you are unclear on what decisions are going to be made on the basis of the results of the needs assessment, then this is a good time to clarify those expectations before you begin to plan, manage, and carry out your assessment. You may have to go back to your boss, the project sponsor, or others in your organization to help clarify how they would like to use the findings of your assessment to guide their choices as well. If conducting the needs assessment was your decision, then clarify the objectives on the basis of the questions to

Box 2.1 Tasks in a Needs Assessment

A useful needs assessment will accomplish the following:

- Focus on results first, solutions second.
- Define needs as gaps in results.
- Align operational, tactical, and strategic performance.
- Systematically analyze needs to inform decisions.
- Consider a broad array of possible activities.
- Compare activities against performance criteria.
- Provide information that justifies the decision before it is made.

which you want answers—answers that will lead to informed and justifiable decisions.

The strategic needs assessment, with its focus on the results required for external partners, generally provides the foundation for successful tactical and operational needs assessments. Without it, you are typically left to rely on assumptions regarding the value of your decisions to clients, communities, and society. In many situations, you may not have the opportunity to formally conduct a strategic assessment as part of your project, but ensuring the alignment of tactical and operational needs with the strategic needs of the external partners and society remains important.

You can, for instance, (a) link your needs assessment to strategic documents (such as the Millennium Development Goals, National Development Strategies, or World Bank Country Assistance Strategies), (b) define strategic needs on the basis of information already collected for other purposes (such as data from the United Nations or Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development), (c) meet with external partners to verify what you find within your institution, and (d) engage client communities throughout the process by sharing your plans and results. Later, tactical and operational needs can be aligned with these strategic findings to verify that all results contribute to development objectives.

Depending on the history of needs assessments within your organization, it is routine for a combined needs assessment—one that addresses strategic, tactical, and operational questions—to be the right choice. Don't panic if this is the case for you as well. Because all three needs assessments will use similar plans, processes, tools, and techniques, you can typically conduct a more efficient and simultaneous set of assessments than if you conducted them individually. By asking questions regarding all three needs

assessments—strategic, tactical, and operational—in one interview, focus group, or survey, you can, for example, save time and money as well as reduce your stress.

Knowing why you are conducting the assessment and what decisions will be made based on its results are the essential foundations for success and are the ideal place to start.

How Do You Conduct a Basic Needs Assessment?

As with any organizational activity, it is best to start your needs assessment with a plan. Your plan will not only help guide the processes within your needs assessment but also help you manage the multiple steps and various partners throughout the assessment.

Depending on the size and scope of your needs assessment (corresponding to the decisions that your needs assessment will guide), you can create a useful plan for identifying needs, analyzing needs, and deciding what to do next (or at least making recommendations). By using this three-step process, you ensure that (a) your assessment focuses on results before solutions, (b) your needs are studied before decisions are made, and (c) your decisions are informed and justified.

For an assessment that is small in scope, you can include in your plan just the primary steps outlined as follows. For an assessment that is larger in scope, add more substeps and details as outlined later in the next section. Your larger-scale assessments will also likely benefit from involving a specialist in needs assessment (or potentially in evaluation) to lead or advise about the assessment. After all, larger assessments will typically involve more questions to be answered, more and different types of stakeholders, more people to gather information from, more information to be analyzed, and more partners in making informed choices. Adjusting the detailed processes within each step of your assessment gives you the flexibility to match your efforts to the desired scope.

That being said, it is important to recognize that although a formal needs assessment will generally follow the same basic steps, having ongoing informal needs assessments can be a necessary tool for responding to changing situations. Even after you complete a formal needs assessment, you should continue to collect information to monitor and evaluate the situation. When you recognize that needs are changing, you should either update the findings of the previous formal needs assessment or begin the process again to update recommendations.

Next are three basic steps that should be included in your plans for a successful needs assessment. In appendix A of this book, you will find additional information, tools, checklists, and resources for managing your assessment.

Identify

The first step in needs assessment is to identify needs (that is, gaps between desired and current results). Although it is often tempting to mix potential solutions (that is, activities or resources) with needs, your assessment will be much more effective if you focus exclusively on results to start. There will be plenty of time for debating potential solutions later in the process. After all, as Henry Kissinger is credited with saying, “If you do not know where you are going, every road will get you nowhere.”

1. Identify your internal and external partners for the needs assessment. Colleagues, clients, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), development partners, and others may all be useful partners in making a quality decision.
2. Determine what data are required to identify needs (that is, gaps) at the strategic, tactical, and operational levels. In other words, what information is required to make an informed and justifiable decision?
3. Determine potential sources of data (for example, community members, documents, and so on) to inform your needs assessment. For instance, is a strategic plan available for the national or provincial government to help guide a tactical-level needs assessment?
4. Make arrangements to collect information that is not already available. Schedule interviews, create surveys, arrange focus groups, collect documents to be reviewed, train focus group facilitators, schedule performance observations, and so forth.
5. Pilot test interview protocols, questionnaires, and other information-gathering tools (see box 2.2).
6. Collect information using a variety of tools and techniques, and include sources that represent varying perspectives on the primary performance issues. Remember to listen—far more than you talk—when collecting information for your needs assessment.
7. Define needs on the basis of performance gaps between current and desired results. Link strategic, tactical, and operational needs to ensure alignment.

Box 2.2 Information-Gathering Tools in Part 3.A

Document or Data Review	page 84
Guided Expert Reviews	page 89
Management of Focus Groups	page 95
Interviews	page 106
Dual-Response Surveys	page 116
SWOT+	page 127
World Café™	
(with “Speed Dating” Variation)	page 132
Delphi Technique	page 137
Performance Observations	page 144
Task Analysis	
(Hierarchical or Sequential, If–Then, and Model-Based)	page 148
Cognitive Task Analysis	page 156

Analyze

The analysis process links needs with the information required to make decisions about what actions should be taken. After all, every need does not require immediate action: causal factors must be reviewed, return-on-investment considerations must be weighed, and priorities must be set. At this point, many ideas for solutions or activities to improve results will be offered. These ideas should also be captured during the analysis, though the focus remains on better understanding the differences between current and desired results.

1. Establish an initial prioritization of needs on the basis of size, scope, distinguishing characteristics, and relative importance.
2. Conduct a needs analysis—for the highest-priority needs—to better understand what is working, what is not working, and what the systemic relationships are among needs.
3. Collect information (a) regarding the causal factors (or root causes) associated with what is not working and (b) leading to priority needs. Use multiple data-collection tools and techniques, and ensure that you capture a variety of perspectives.
4. Analyze and synthesize the useful information you have collected about the needs.

Box 2.3 Decision-Making Tools in Part 3.B

Nominal Group Technique (A Group Consensus-Building and Ranking Technique)	page 166
Multicriteria Analysis	page 171
Tabletop Analysis	page 180
Pair-Wise Comparison	page 187
2 × 2 Matrix Decision Aids	page 191
Fishbone Diagrams	page 197
Scenarios	page 202
Root Cause Analysis	page 207
Fault Tree Analysis	page 214
Concept Mapping	page 220
Future Wheel	page 228
Performance Pyramid	page 236

Decide

Making complex decisions based on the analysis is the next step (see box 2.3). This step is also often the hardest, given (a) competing interests for certain types of activities to occur, (b) difficulties in agreeing to the criteria to use in making the decisions, and (c) typical realities for negotiation and compromise. Nevertheless, information from steps 1 and 2 will increase the potential for making a justifiable decision that will lead to desired results.

1. Working with needs assessment partners, establish the criteria on which decisions will be made about what to do (for example, cost, time, impact).³
2. Identify multiple activities (that is, solutions) that in combination could achieve desired results. There are always multiple options to be considered, so it is important not to become fixated on any one solution until it can be compared with others against the agreed-upon criteria.
3. Evaluate each potential performance improvement activity to assess its value to your improvement effort.
4. Prioritize the identified needs on the basis of the cost to meet the need (that is, closing the gap) versus the cost of not meeting the need (that is, not closing the gap).⁴
5. Summarize your recommendations in a needs assessment report or presentation, and disseminate the information.

- Evaluate your needs assessment process to determine if changes should be made before you complete your next assessment.

Use the three primary steps (identify, analyze, decide) as a general guide for your needs assessment. For informal needs assessments, these three steps and the recommended substeps may be enough to inform your decision.

How Do You Conduct a Larger-Scale Needs Assessment?

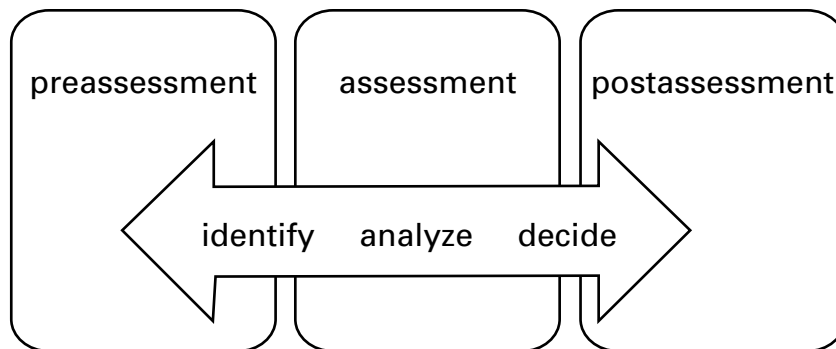
Larger-scale needs assessments typically require a more detailed and formal needs assessment process. If, for instance, you are planning a six-month needs assessment that requires the engagement of several government ministries and donor partners, then the three general steps of identify, analyze, and decide will not be sufficient.

In these cases, Jim Altschuld (2010) suggests that the needs assessment be conducted in three phases: preassessment activities, assessment activities, and postassessment activities.⁵ The three previously discussed steps (identify, analyze, decide) can then be integrated into the assessment activities, providing a proactical approach to your assessment (see figure 2.1).

Phase 1. Preassessment

The purpose of this phase is to determine the overall scope and plan for the assessment so you ensure that implementation goes smoothly and generates justifiable information to make decisions. The preassessment phase relies

Figure 2.1 Needs Assessment Phases and Basic Steps



Source: Based in part on Altschuld 2010.

on using existing information as much as possible, rather than on collecting new information, to inform decisions.

1. With the sponsors of the assessment, determine the overall scope of the needs assessment.
2. Depending on the scope of the assessment, identify the primary performance issues that are leading to the needs assessment. To the extent possible, review existing information (such as earlier reports or surveys) to guide the assessment.
3. Define what data and information are required from the needs assessment to adequately inform decisions. This step may require that you collect some preliminary information from key stakeholders and partners to define objectives and select methods.
4. With others, create a management plan for the needs assessment (see appendix A).
5. Validate your management plan for the needs assessment with colleagues, peers, clients, partners, the assessment's sponsors, and others who will have a stake in the success of the assessment.

Phase 2. Assessment

The purpose of this phase is to implement the assessment in a methodologically sound manner that generates justifiable information to make decisions.

1. Make arrangements to collect the necessary information from the various sources. Schedule interviews, create surveys, arrange focus groups, collect documents to be reviewed, train group facilitators when necessary, schedule performance observations, and so forth.
2. Review protocols, questionnaires, and other information-gathering tools to verify that you capture the necessary information regarding both the current achievements and the desired accomplishments.
3. Collect information by (a) using a variety of tools and techniques and (b) including sources that represent varying perspectives on the primary performance issues.

4. Define needs on the basis of performance gaps between current and desired results.
5. Establish an initial prioritization of needs on the basis of size, scope, distinguishing characteristics, and relative importance.
6. For the highest-priority needs, create a plan for collecting information on the factors that are likely leading to the performance gaps.
7. Collect information regarding the causal factors (or root causes) associated with priority needs.
8. Analyze and synthesize the useful information you have collected.
9. For each priority need and its associated causal factors, identify multiple performance-improvement activities that in combination could address the complete need.
10. Evaluate each potential performance-improvement activity to assess its value to your improvement effort.
11. Use the information to prioritize needs and make recommendations regarding the improvement efforts that will best achieve desired results within the given context.

Phase 3. Postassessment

The purpose of this phase is to underscore that the assessment does not end once priorities have been set. Information from the assessment must be shared and used to guide decisions. Additionally, situations change, and you should routinely collect and assess information as part of ongoing monitoring and evaluation. This phase supports the implementation of recommendations and offers opportunities to take corrective actions where necessary.

1. Summarize your recommendations in a needs assessment report or presentation.
2. Communicate your draft findings to your stakeholders. For larger-scale assessments, this step may involve developing a dissemination strategy, communication strategies, and assessment reports and presentations. It is also good practice to share findings with people who provided information and other inputs for your assessment.

3. Integrate postassessment monitoring and evaluation activities into recommended activities that will be undertaken.
4. Evaluate your needs assessment process to determine if changes should be made before you complete your next assessment.

Build flexibility into your plan, but don't be tempted to take the first plausible solution that shows up and forget about the rest of the assessment that you have designed. Research by Paul Nutt (2008) at Ohio State University illustrates that this tendency, which he refers to as taking an *emergent opportunity*, leads to less-successful results from your decisions than if you follow through with the complete needs assessment, which he refers to as *discovery decision making*.⁶

Nevertheless, you can, for example, complete multiple tasks at the same time to save time and resources. Skipping steps or reversing the order of activities can, however, cause problems or lead to missed opportunities to improve performance. Therefore, especially for needs assessments with a larger scope, include dependencies that illustrate which tasks must be completed before subsequent steps can begin.

Lastly, continually review your needs assessment plan throughout the process to ensure that necessary results have been accomplished before moving on to subsequent, and dependent, tasks. If your assessment drifts away from a focus on performance and results, then it is better to know this change early so that corrective actions can be taken.

Who Should Be Involved in a Needs Assessment?

Needs assessments are rarely successful when performed as an individual activity. Instead, involve others inside and outside your organization to gain multiple perspectives on both the results that should be accomplished and the current levels of performance for comparison. From ministry officials and donor partners to internal managers and volunteers, having various partners represented in your needs assessment will improve the quality of your assessment and will create buy-in to the recommendations that follow.

Building a team (or a committee) to conduct the assessment is also essential to the success of your performance improvement efforts. Not only is a needs assessment typically more work than one individual can do, but also conducting a needs assessment with a single perspective can be dangerous.

Table 2.2 Sample Partners in a Needs Assessment for Regional Planning

	Strategic needs assessment	Tactical needs assessment	Operational needs assessment	Combined strategic, tactical, and operational
Information sources				
Clients	***	**	*	***
Customers	***	**	*	***
Community members	***	**	*	***
Senior managers	***	***	*	***
Functional heads or managers	**	***	***	***
Performers	*	**	***	***
Supervisors	*	**	***	***
Suppliers	**	**	***	**
Volunteers	**	**	***	**
Ministry officials	***	**	*	***
Elected officials	***	**	*	***
NGOs	***	**	*	***
Local community groups	***	**	*	***
Needs assessment team				
Executive sponsor	***	***	**	***
Project manager	***	***	***	***
Administrative staff	**	*	*	**
Data collection staff	*	**	**	**
Communications staff	***	**	*	***

Notes: See pages 39–40 for definitions of strategic, tactical, and operational needs assessments.

* = Valued partners who, if available, can improve the quality of your assessment.

** = Important partners who, although not essential, contribute to a successful assessment.

*** = Critical partners whose participation is essential for success.

The varied perspectives offered by others on your assessment team will add significant value to the information that you collect and the decision that you make.⁷ Table 2.2 illustrates the relationship of multiple, potential partners for needs assessments of differing scopes.

How Long Will a Needs Assessment Take?

The time required to complete a practical needs assessment depends on many variables, from your previous experiences with needs assessments, to the availability of information within your organization, to the scope of your assessment. As a result, you can complete a quality needs assessment in as little time as a week, whereas more complex decisions may require an assessment that spans several months.

Answering the following questions can help you determine the time required for your needs assessment:

1. What is the scope of your needs assessment: strategic, tactical, operational, or all three? How many and how complex are the performance-related questions that your needs assessment is going to inform?
2. Has another needs assessment been completed within your organization in the past year?
3. Does your organization have a strategic plan that clearly links strategic, tactical, and operational performance objectives? Are data on current performance routinely collected to inform decisions in your organization?
4. Have you previously managed a needs assessment or an evaluation?
5. Do you, or do people working with you on the needs assessment, have experience in collecting, analyzing, and synthesizing information?
6. Are there project deadlines or external events that establish a “must complete by” date for the assessment?

Depending on your responses to these questions, the length of a needs assessment can vary from a few days to a couple of months. After answering the questions, use the needs assessment tools found in appendix A to estimate the number of days required for each assessment activity. Be sure to factor in that many of the steps can be completed simultaneously, but that there are also several that cannot be started until a previous step has been completed.

After all this planning, determine how much time you, and others, have to dedicate to the assessment. Review your commitments to other projects, your upcoming vacation schedule, and other events on your calendar that may extend the amount of time required to complete the assessment. Also factor in that others, especially those whom you are counting on to provide useful information, will be out of town, busy, or on holiday (or vacation) during this time.

We realize that this is no easy formula, and from our experience “easy formulas” typically underestimate the amount of time required to complete a useful assessment. Some experienced professionals estimate how long it will take to complete the assessment, and then double or triple that time to be realistic about how long the assessment will take to complete.

How Do You Manage a Needs Assessment?

Managing a needs assessment is very much akin to managing any other project within an organization. Therefore, in appendix A of this book, we have included a number of needs assessment project management guides, checklists, and resources.

To effectively manage your needs assessment, also consider the following:⁸

- *Involve both internal and external partners from day 1.* A needs assessment is rarely an activity that can be completed successfully without engaging both internal and external partners. From internal partners that represent varied perspectives within your organization to external partners that characterize perspectives of communities, clients, government officials, consultants, suppliers, and others outside of your organization, each group plays an essential role in defining and prioritizing needs as well as in identifying and prioritizing potential activities to improve performance.
- *Get a needs assessment sponsor or champion in top management.* When it comes to a needs assessment, successful project management requires that you have a combination of responsibility (for the results of the needs assessment), authority (to make decisions), and accountability (for the accomplishments associated with assessment). Avoid situations where you are responsible and accountable but have no authority to achieve the necessary results. It is important in most situations that the sponsor delegates to you the authority necessary to make management decisions regarding the needs assessment.
- *Establish measurable goals, objectives, and deliverables.* Needs assessments are best managed through detailed goals, objectives, deliverables, and timelines. Use project management tools, such as Gantt or PERT charts, to guide your project from start to finish.⁹ Establish clear and measurable objectives for each phase of the needs assessment, and then track your successful achievements. At the same time, remain flexible. Needs are constantly changing—some are leaving (for instance, when a

related project achieves positive results, or when your organization shifts its objectives under new leadership), and others are emerging (for instance, when changing global economic conditions strain the limited resources of a developing country). Your assessment—and subsequent decisions—must be able to adjust to these realities.

- *Lead the planning process and the assessment.* Successful needs assessments do not happen by chance or luck. Rather, they are led by an individual (or a team), and they require a blend of leadership and management skills. From motivating team members and guiding decisions to sharing authority and taking accountability, leadership plays an essential role in the success of any needs assessment. It is easy to get so wrapped up in managing the day-to-day activities of your project that your leadership gets lost.
- *Balance time, budget, and quality of needs assessment results.* There is no “perfect” needs assessment; consequently your success depends on finding an appropriate balance of time, budget, and quality of results that can be achieved. As you develop your needs assessment plan and guide that plan through implementation, reflect on these three variables to ensure that you are not losing balance or focus. Roger Kaufman (2006) goes as far as to suggest that “anything worth doing is worth doing poorly, at least at first.” In other words, a less-than-perfect needs assessment usually has more value than a needs assessment that never gets done; at least, the former gives a starting place for making improvements.
- *Establish your management style.* There is no ideal management style for all needs assessments. At some times, you may have to be more authoritarian to get things done; at other times, you may want to manage by objectives (and then get out of the way so that people can be successful in their tasks). Establish your *primary* management style early on in the project. If you find that it isn’t working for the needs assessment, then reflect on your experiences and select another management style that may achieve better results.
- *Assess your strengths and weaknesses.* To manage a successful needs assessment, know your own strengths and weaknesses (for instance, you may be great at keeping the project organized but less effective in leading focus groups as part of data collection). In addition, it is useful to know the strengths and weaknesses of your assessment team members (for example, one member may be great at conducting interviews but unable to view the perspectives of others when synthesizing information from various sources). Understanding and applying these factors as you assign

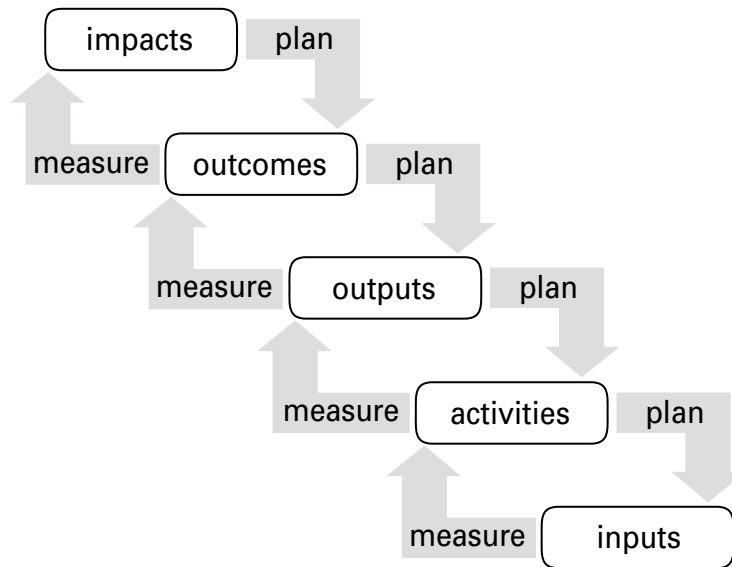
roles, guide decisions, and manage the daily activities is important to your success—and to the success of the assessment.

- *Communicate early and often.* Keep your partners engaged and active throughout the needs assessment rather than letting them become passive observers (see Greer 1999). These internal and external partners include the assessment team, sponsors, and others who may be providing information to the assessment or using the results to inform their decisions. Consequently, from the time you kick off your assessment until the findings have been communicated, keep your partners involved in the information gathering and decision making to some extent. Whether it is calling them once a week to ask for guidance, e-mailing them sample questionnaires, or holding community information meetings, keeping your partners engaged requires that you do not forget about them for weeks or months at a time. After all, if you lose their interest during the needs assessment process, then it is very difficult to get that interest back during the implementation of recommended activities.
- *Keep your focus on the results (or don't get distracted by processes or potential solutions).* Stay focused on the results to be accomplished by your needs assessment. Frequently, you are so distracted by all of the activities (such as interviews, focus groups, team management, and performance analysis) required to complete a needs assessment that you lose focus of your intended results. Routinely review your assessment's goals and objectives to ensure that all of your decisions are guided by the performance targets. Similarly, when potential solutions (including bridges, roads, new computers, wells, dams, microloans, training, mentoring, and other improvement activities) are mentioned, don't be distracted; stay focused on defining your needs as being gaps in results. In the end, the results of your decisions will be significantly better if you follow through with the whole needs assessment.¹⁰

Where Does a Project's Logic Model Fit In?

Logic models (also known as results chains, results frameworks, program theory, or log frames) are common planning, monitoring, evaluating, and communicating tools used to guide development projects (see figure 2.2). They display the sequential relationships that describe what the project (or program) uses, does, produces, and delivers—as well as the short-term and long-term desired effects (societal results) of those efforts. The models illustrate the “logic” of how investments (money, time, effort, and so on) are intended to achieve a series of results.

Figure 2.2 Logic Models for Planning, Monitoring, and Evaluating



Source: Based on Watkins (2007) and on multiple works by Roger Kaufman, though labels for the three levels of results (impacts, outcomes, outputs) have been modified from his model (outcomes, outputs, products) to reflect the prevalent terminology of the logic model and international development literature.

The logic model works this way: inputs or resources are provided to implement activities. The activities should result in the production and delivery of services or products, which are outputs. These services or products should cause something to change in the desired direction. In the near and medium term, the program’s effects are outcomes. The longer-term effects of the program are referred to as impacts. In short, a logic model describes a plausible, causal relationship between inputs and how those inputs will lead to the intended outcomes.

Impacts are the long-term societal results of a project or program. Impacts typically refer to goal attainment and are sometimes referred to as higher-level outcomes. Examples include reduced child mortality and improved rates of economic growth. Achievement of higher-level outcomes is generally beyond the control of those implementing a project, and project implementers should usually not be held solely accountable for achieving them.

Outcomes are the effect or result of activities and outputs at the institutional or organizational level. Outcomes reflect uptake, adoption, or use of outputs by those who are supposed to benefit from the project. Outcomes are what things are changed because of the project or program. Examples

include children who have learned more because the quality of their education has improved and who have fewer illnesses because of access to clean water. “Good” outcomes can be measured.

Outputs are the supply-side services or products produced as a result of a project’s activities. Examples include the construction of 500 schools, the training of 1,500 nurses, an increase of 20 percent in the production of corn, and a plan for strengthening social protection programs.

Activities are what the project does with the inputs. Examples of activities or interventions include building schools, hospitals, or irrigation canals; training teachers; buying textbooks; developing plans; creating partnerships; and immunizing children.

Inputs are the project’s resources, including money, staff, facilities, equipment, and technical expertise.

Logic models typically identify a level of inputs, a level of processes, and then three levels of results. Hence, an important element of a logic model is the differentiation of means (inputs and activities) and results (outputs, outcomes, and impacts) but don’t let this cause unnecessary confusion. Some organizations, for instance, prefer to call the three levels of results *outputs*, *outcomes*, and *impacts*; other institutions refer to them as *products*, *outputs*, and *outcomes*. Still other organizations use different terminology. The terms are, however, less important than the alignment of results, thereby ensuring that everything a project uses, does, produces, and delivers makes desired contributions to communities and society.

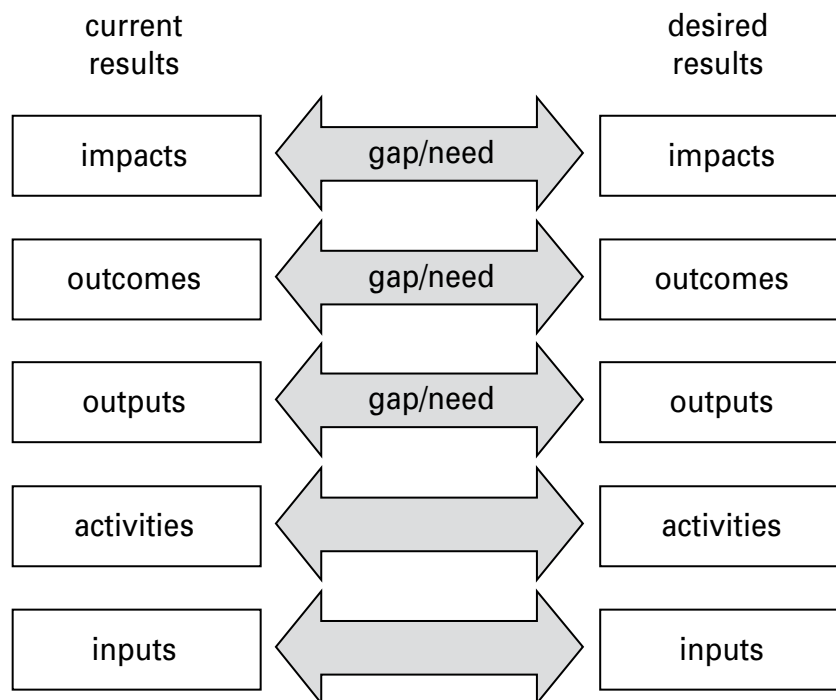
When planning, use logic models (starting with impacts) to determine what results must be accomplished, and then later determine what processes and inputs will best achieve those results. When monitoring or evaluating projects, use the logic model to measure (a) if adequate resources were obtained, (b) if they were used efficiently within the project processes, and (c) then what results (outputs, outcomes, and impacts) were achieved. From here, the project cycle of *assess*, *plan*, *act*, *monitor*, and *evaluate* can begin again.

When available, logic models are an important resource to inform your needs assessment and subsequent decisions. When a model is not available, the results of your needs assessment can easily be used to create one.¹¹ Within your needs assessment, for example, the logic model can provide a framework for relating current and desired results (see figure 2.3).

Notice that *needs* are only gaps in results, not gaps in activities or inputs. Although your needs assessment should examine gaps for all elements of the logic model, it is important to differentiate gaps in results at the impacts, outcomes, and outputs levels from the activities and resources used to achieve results.

Logic models provide a systemic perspective of projects and offer a useful framework for a needs assessment though your assessment should also look beyond the logic model to ensure that gaps in results are viewed from a systemic perspective. Logic models are predominantly project or program focused, which means they can frequently miss the interdependencies and relationships that span multiple projects, elements critical to making informed decisions. For example, the logic model for a reproductive health project was likely created independent of projects in other

Figure 2.3 Logic Models as a Needs Assessment Framework



Source: Based on the organizational elements model described in Kaufman (2003) and his other publications. However, it should be noted that Kaufman refers to the three levels of results as *products*, *outputs*, and *outcomes*, with the latter being those results that primarily benefit society. Kaufman's focus on the beneficiaries' results at each level has distinct advantages over the time-based reference points (such as long- or short-term impacts) that are more common in the logic models literature. Within the Kaufman framework, the primary beneficiaries of *products* are individuals and teams, of *outputs* are organizations, and of *outcomes* is society, thereby making it easier to distinguish and align results during the needs assessment. Nevertheless, given the broad use of logic models literature in international development projects, we will use outputs, outcomes, and impacts throughout this book.

sectors (such as agriculture or transportation) or projects of other development agencies (such as projects funded by NGOs or even those of the client government).

Use logic models as a tool for understanding the relationships of what is used, done, produced, delivered, and contributed to the broader society. Doing so will guide your assessment and will ensure that strategic, tactical, and operational decisions are aligned.

What Types of Data Should You Collect?

Data do not make decisions, but they should play a significant role in supporting your decision making. In his book titled *The ROI of Human Capital*, Jac Fitz-Enz (2009) advises that it is a management imperative to convert data into meaningful information, to turn information into intelligence related to business issues, and then to share that intelligence with others. Needs assessments offer systematic processes for doing just that, thereby providing structure and tools that guide the translation of data into useful information that can be used to make informed decisions about what to do next, which over time creates business intelligence that can be shared with others.

Perspectives on needs assessment also play a vital role in determining (a) which data collection techniques you use; (b), how you ask questions within the technique; (c) what questions you ask; and (d) how you analyze the resulting information to identify, define, and prioritize needs. A combination of discrepancy and appreciative inquiry perspectives is typically valuable to ensure that your assessment determines both what is working well and where improvements can be made.

- A *discrepancy* perspective views needs assessment as a process for identifying and measuring differences and inconsistency between what is and what should be at the strategic, tactical, or operational level.
- An *appreciative inquiry* perspective views needs assessment as a process for engaging people across the performance system so they can build organizations, programs, and projects around what works, rather than exclusively focusing on trying to fix what doesn't.

Given that needs are defined as performance gaps, a discrepancy perspective of data and information is most typically associated with a needs assessment. Discrepancy data are actually quite valuable for informing decisions

and improving performance although alone they are not likely enough to consistently make justifiable decisions that will lead to desired results. Likewise, the appreciative inquiry perspective can focus too much on improving activities that are already taking place, without recognizing that improving results may require new activities that address specific weaknesses or future performance expectations. Thus, a combination of the two perspectives is generally recommended for a comprehensive needs assessment.

Discrepancy Data Collection and Information Gathering

Needs assessments and subsequent decisions generally benefit from data and information regarding performance discrepancies. Incomplete projects, missed deadlines, low client satisfaction are discrepancies between desired accomplishments and current achievements that will help shape your assessment and decisions. It is, therefore, useful to collect data and information that can readily describe performance discrepancies. Survey data, interview responses, focus group results, performance observations, document reviews, and other needs assessment tools and techniques described in this book can all be used to illustrate performance discrepancies. For example, the interview question “Given the context of our organization, what would be the desired or expected length of time for a project to go from concept to funding approval, and how long does it currently take?” readily offers discrepancy data that can define a need.

The value of information to illustrate performance discrepancies is not defined by the type of data. Qualitative, quantitative, hard, and soft data can all be used effectively to point out performance discrepancies. Descriptive differences in perceptions can be just as valuable to your needs assessment as numeric data drawn from a database. Information viewed from a discrepancy perspective does not depend on the type of data you have but rather on the point of view you use to compare those data against other information.

Appreciative Inquiry Data Collection and Information Gathering

Focusing exclusively on performance discrepancies can, nevertheless, cast a dark shadow on the many positive achievements within any organization. Taking an appreciative inquiry perspective acts to balance the potentially negative view of performance. By identifying and highlighting the positive achievements, you are adding to your assessment valuable information about what is working well and how you can build on those results.

As you do when looking at performance from a discrepancy perspective, use various assessment tools and techniques when applying an appreciative inquiry perspective. From this perspective, you can also successfully conduct surveys, interviews, focus groups, observations, and reviews and can use other assessment tools. The difference is that rather than looking for gaps in performance, you are identifying the beneficial results of current activities and determining how they can be improved on to achieve future results.¹²

Information gathered from an appreciative inquiry perspective can identify activities that should be maintained or expanded to accomplish desired results. By coordinating these successful activities with the performance improvement activities coming out of your needs assessment, you can increase the likelihood of sustainable improvements.

Collection of Diverse Data

Use a similar integration of qualitative (or quality), quantitative (or quantity), hard (or externally verifiable), and soft (or not externally verifiable) data collection procedures to ensure that your needs assessment is robust

Table 2.3 Examples of Data-Collection Tools and Techniques for Each Data Type

	Hard (externally verifiable data)	Soft (not externally verifiable data)
Quantitative (numeric expressions of a variable)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Performance data • Budget analysis 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Performance ratings • Scaled surveys (for example, 1 = disagree, 5 = agree)^a
Qualitative (nonnumeric expressions of a variable)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analysis of a list serve • Document review • Focus groups^b • Multisource performance observations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opinion surveys • Individual interviews • Single-source performance observations

Source: Watkins (2007).

a. The results of Likert-type scale surveys are often mistakenly thought of as hard data because they result in quantifiable data. This is a good example of why you should consider data on both dimensions (hard-soft and quantitative-qualitative) because a single dimension may lead to confusion or the use of inappropriate statistical techniques and related conclusions.

b. Focus groups can offer participants the ability to verify the input of other participants, thereby offering external verification of data of individual participants.

and diverse. Each of the different categories of data can be important to your assessment. Each has strengths and weaknesses; therefore, including information from a variety of categories (for instance, soft quantitative and hard qualitative) gives you a more balanced view of the need (see table 2.3).

Likewise, both inductive and deductive approaches to analysis should be considered after you have collected data. Inductive approaches start with a blank slate to identify emerging trends or patterns. Conversely, deductive approaches begin with a framework or model, and then they sort data into the prescribed structure. Both approaches can be effective techniques, and they can complement each other in the same needs assessment. There is, however, no easy formula for determining which approach is appropriate for your assessment. Consider both options for each category of data, and use the approach that best fits your context.

Which Tools and Techniques from This Book Should You Use?

Needs assessments rely on a broad set of common tools and techniques for collecting information and making decisions; many of these tools and techniques are also applied during or after an activity for monitoring, quality improvement, and evaluation purposes. From focus groups and interviews to scenarios and fishbone diagrams, most of the tools are not unique to the needs assessment process; rather, it is the “before a decision is made” perspective applied to each tool that defines the value of a needs assessment.

Your assessment, for instance, may be used to determine what combination of social aid programs will best improve the quality of life for impoverished people living in rural communities. The findings of the assessment could lead to a series of activities that are intended to achieve desired results. However, the context of communities is always changing (for instance, natural disasters occur, changes in government leadership can reduce funding, and emigration patterns change), and the implementation of projects is often quite different from what was intended (for instance, project leaders may not work with community leaders as imagined, project staff members may leave the country, or new technologies may offer unforeseen improvements to the project). Development projects are, therefore, complex and often unpredictable.

Despite this unpredictability, your needs assessment must define and prioritize needs and then must support decisions about what to do. Moreover, your success is frequently measured according to the results of the activities that were recommended in this ever-changing environment. Your assess-

ment, therefore, cannot rely on just one tool (for example, a survey) for collecting information and another (for example, straw polls) for making decisions. Typically, you want to have (and use) a number of optional tools to meet the high expectations.

The needs assessment tools and techniques included in this book offer just a sample of the many ways that you can gather information, make decisions, and improve performance. All the same, it is often challenging to decide which tools or techniques are best for your needs assessment. For some assessments, focus group techniques may be most valuable to ensure partner buy-in. For other assessments, a blend of analytical tools and group decision-making techniques may make the most sense. The choices are, however, rarely easy. For that reason, we have divided the tools and techniques into two categories for needs assessment applications: *information gathering* and *decision making*.

Some of the tools (such as the delphi technique on page 137 or dual-response surveys on page 116) are most effective when you are working with a large number of partners in your needs assessment, whereas others (such as interviews on page 106, fishbone diagrams on page 197, or concept mapping on page 220) can be used equally as well with small or large groups. Similarly, tools and techniques such as surveys and multicriteria analysis can provide useful facts and figures in quantified ways, whereas interviews, case studies, and scenarios provide qualitative information that is also useful in making decisions.

Choosing the right mixture of tools and techniques for collecting information and making decisions is, therefore, much more of an art than a science. Your experiences, background, and confidence in using any of this book's tools and techniques should also inform your decision. If you have the resources to use experts, such as focus group facilitators, interviewers, or return-on-investment analysts, then this involvement will also influence the options you have available for completing your needs assessment.

In addition, we have developed two guides to help you select the appropriate tools for your context. In appendix A, you will find (a) *Tools and Techniques to Consider* and (b) the *Guide to Selecting Tools and Techniques*. These guides can be valuable resources for identifying, comparing, and choosing the tools and techniques for your next assessment.

When Do You Have Enough Information?

Determining when you have “enough” information to make informed and justifiable decisions depends greatly on the decisions you are trying to make

and the consequences of those choices. Fortunately, when applying many of the collaborative tools and techniques described in this book, it is more easily evident when you have enough information to move ahead or when more information is required to make justifiable decisions.

For example, if you are using a nominal group technique (see page 166) to make a decision, the participants will let you know when more information is required to move on. Likewise, without the necessary data, you will not be able to adequately complete a multicriteria analysis (see page 171) without going back to gather more information. Often, with other techniques, an indicator that you have collected enough data is when you begin to hear the same comments again and again.

When you believe that your assessment has collected enough information to inform a justifiable decision, move on to the next step in your plan. If you get to the decision step and cannot make a decision that is justified by the results of your assessment, then you can always go back to collect any missing information.

Most needs assessments that are done within the context of organizational decision making do not apply statistical standards for sample sizes or confidence intervals. For researchers, guidelines are clear about these issues. Within an organization, however, data from one knowledgeable and experienced staff member may be worth more than survey results from 100 randomly selected staff members. The goal of your needs assessment is to inform a decision, and thus you have a good deal of latitude in determining when enough data have been collected.

As decisions increase in importance, you may, nevertheless, want to examine the statistical standards for sample size and related confidence intervals (as applied in the analysis of quantitative data). For instance, if your needs assessment seeks to identify the needs of HIV/AIDS populations in five countries, and if you determine that a survey is among the data-collection tools to be used to gather necessary information, then it would be important to work with a statistician to determine the appropriate sampling procedures, sample size, and related confidence intervals before conducting the survey.

Although not collecting enough information to inform decisions is one risk in conducting a needs assessment, another risk is the temptation to continue collecting data rather than making a decision. In all assessments, you must take the information you have available at some point and must decide (or recommend) which activities should be used to achieve results. Do your best to strike an appropriate balance between the two risks—having too little or never believing that you have enough—within the context of your assessment.

How Do You Use the Information You Collected to Make Decisions?

To begin, verify that you have the “right” information to make the necessary decisions. From having information that clearly defines the desired results and measures the current levels of performance, to having information on which potential solutions could achieve desired results and knowing how much they could cost, it is important that your needs assessment collects information that could lead to a justifiable decision about what to do.

For each variable that is important to your decisions (for instance, workforce productivity, employee motivation, government policies, client satisfaction, quarterly expenditures, poverty levels, quality of life, and so forth), you should collect data and information regarding both the results that should be accomplished and the results that are currently being achieved. It is also useful to have information supporting how improvements can best be made. Although you can’t predict the future, you can use information to support forecasts, scenarios, or anticipated returns on investments.

Alone, determining the size of the gap (desired results minus current results) rarely provides a complete picture. Knowing, for instance, that the desired results of your clients are significantly higher than those outlined in your organization’s current strategic plan is valuable information. Organizations are frequently out of touch with their direct and indirect clients.

Likewise, too often we assume that everyone within our organization strives to achieve the same goals and objectives. The reality is that if you were to ask 10 people doing the same job inside of your organization what results they are expected to accomplish, typically you would get at least eight different answers. Document perceptions (or misperceptions) of the desired performance among staff members, and then compare that to the expectations of the organization, clients, and other partners.

Similarly, analyze the information you collect regarding desired performance to gain insights into the priorities of different stakeholders—inside and outside your organization. Routinely in a needs assessment, you will find that groups perceive performance goals differently (for example, headquarters staff members in contrast to field staff members, managers in contrast to clients, or administrators in contrast to trainers). For one group, the desired results are X; for the other group, the goals are Y. Both sets of goals may be right, both may be wrong, or the answer may be somewhere in between. In any case, this analysis yields essential information for guiding your decisions.

A successful needs assessment collects data both to define and understand needs and to identify and compare alternative solutions. The equi-

Box 2.4 Finding Options: An Example

Through interviews you learn that there are multiple options for reducing the number of waterborne illnesses in rural communities, and then through document reviews you further learn the advantages and disadvantages of each option—as well as the other changes that must take place in the community for each option to be successful.

Likewise, engineering specifications for each option provide useful information on maintenance costs. Using these data, you can make informed decisions about which options will work best in the given country context.

nality principle of systems theory tells us that for any need there are always multiple options for achieving desired results.¹³ The data that you collect can help determine which solutions (typically in combinations) should be considered (see box 2.4).

Using information to guide your decisions frequently requires that you first transform raw data (such as productivity reports, performance appraisals, or interview notes) into usable information. Data analysis techniques are typically used to facilitate this transformation. For instance, you may choose a qualitative analysis technique to transform notes from multiple focus groups into thematic responses that illustrate the major findings. Or you may use quantitative correlations to identify relationships between productivity reports and quarterly financial reports.

Many technologies for summarizing quantitative (or numeric) data are now available.¹⁴ Frequencies, averages, and even standard deviations can easily be obtained from spreadsheet data using such programs. These descriptive summaries of the data are usually of more value to decision makers than are pages and pages of raw data. Spreadsheet software also makes it easy for you to illustrate information using graphs, charts, or tables to easily communicate needs assessment findings.

Likewise, numerous pages transcribing the discussions in focus groups or interviews are rarely of great value when making decisions. Instead, use inductive, deductive, or combined approaches to reducing qualitative data so they become pertinent themes and constructive quotes.

Information alone is not, however, enough to consistently make quality decisions. Information has to be moved into useful knowledge through reflection, through links to organizational issues, and by sharing with others to gain valuable perspectives. Many of this book's tools and techniques are designed to facilitate those processes. From tabletop analysis (see page 180)

and nominal group technique (see page 166) to scenarios (see page 202) and multicriteria analysis (see page 171), there are many ways to facilitate decision making by helping turn information into knowledge.

Remaining flexible is essential to your needs assessment. Initial conversations will provide guidance on what knowledge is necessary to make informed decisions, but later conversations will frequently transform or expand on these requirements, thereby sending you back to collect more data to inform the pending decisions. Rigid frameworks for determining what data can be collected and what information is necessary to inform justifiable decisions just don't work.

Look at multiple options when looking for solutions, then use agreed-upon performance criteria to assess each of your alternatives (as well as combinations of alternatives). Choose the set of improvement activities that will most likely accomplish desired results in a sustainable manner.

There are, of course, no guarantees. Because your needs assessment focuses on collecting information to inform decisions before they are made, all you have to go on are forecasts, estimates, or "best guesses" of what results can be achieved through various activities. This is just the nature of needs assessments.

Fortunately, from past experiences and through methodical research, you can frequently anticipate future performance with a fair amount of accuracy. Although needs assessments cannot predict all aspects of the future, the characteristics of a systematic assessment increase the likelihood of making quality decisions, thereby giving you the opportunity to make well-informed choices that balance the potential risks and rewards.

What Activities Should You Consider as Solutions?

Do not begin any needs assessment with a solution in mind—not training, not a new high-speed train, not a new HIV/AIDS awareness program, not a new software application, not a reform of economic policy, not even a great motivational seminar by a leading expert in your discipline.

Needs assessments are not worth your time if you are looking only to rationalize a decision that was already made. Rather, enter every needs assessment with a mostly blank slate; then gather information on performance needs, link performance gaps to contributing factors, look for creative ideas, assess solutions, and evaluate alternative activities.

Although you may enter a needs assessment with some ideas and experiences about what solutions may be appropriate to achieve results or what

ministry officials want to do, you must hold those possible solutions until they can be evaluated along with the alternatives. Trainers, for example, frequently enter a needs assessment only to rationalize training as the answer to every need. Likewise, experts in developing irrigation systems may find that their needs assessments recurrently justify their creating irrigation systems. After all, nearly everyone feels most comfortable in recommending solutions with which they are already quite familiar from previous experiences. Whether it is digging wells, training teachers, building dams, writing policies, securing loans, or any other activity, prematurely selecting a solution before completing a formal or informal needs assessment rarely leads to sustainable improvements in results. (See also Watkins and Leigh 2010.)

You must put preferred solutions aside, even when others (including your boss or even those who are sponsoring the needs assessment) recommend a plausible solution early in the assessment process. Hold onto such preferred solutions until they can be fairly evaluated. Don't discount them by any means, but don't introduce them as possible solutions unless the results of your needs assessment justify their potential.

Include in your list of optional solutions those that make the most sense within your context. There are always options, so do not settle for the first one or two possible solutions that get mentioned. Press on and listen to what people are telling you during the needs assessment. At the same time, be discerning and include only those that can achieve the desired results within the constraints of your context.¹⁵

Finally, single solutions rarely achieve sustainable improvements in performance. They typically address only one aspect of an entire performance system. The creation of a performance appraisal program, for example, may be a valuable project for improving performance in a government ministry. But alone, performance appraisals do not address the complete performance system, thereby leaving motivation, knowledge and skills, capacity, incentives, and other elements of performance unattended. Use tools such as the performance pyramid (page 236) to ensure that the activities you select as a result of your needs assessment address the whole performance system.¹⁶

How Do You Decide Which Activities to Implement?

Deciding (or selecting) which improvement activities will best achieve your desired results given the unique characteristics and constraints of your assessment can be challenging. Begin by using the findings of your needs assessment to link potential improvement activities to the causal factors

that are leading to less-than-desired performance. Then evaluate each of your options against performance standards (or criteria) generated in your assessment. You should also evaluate differing combinations of the solutions to determine the appropriate “mix.” In many situations, you can then apply participatory techniques such as pair-wise comparison (see page 187) and multicriteria analysis (see page 171) to determine which combinations can best achieve desired results in a sustainable manner.

Several variables should go into determining which activities—or combinations of activities—are “right” for your situation. The variables include the following:

- ✓ The type of gap—strategic, tactical, operational, or all three—and its level of priority
- ✓ The causal factors for the need (for instance, conflicting priorities, new skill requirements, lack of clarity, inappropriate incentives)
- ✓ What the organization or country is already doing (for instance, existing development programs, mentoring, or strategic initiatives)
- ✓ The ability of the activities to accomplish desired results
- ✓ The appropriateness of the activities for the organization and its culture
- ✓ The feasibility of the activities being implemented successfully
- ✓ The economic costs of the activities in relation to beneficial results¹⁷

There is, however, no one best way to weigh the variables. In some contexts, the economic feasibility will guide most of the decisions (such as when resources are very limited), whereas at other times the accomplishment of necessary results may drive most of your decisions (such as when responding to a natural disaster). Likewise, many assessments rely on group decision-making tools (such as the nominal group technique on page 166), whereas others rely on analytical techniques (such as the multicriteria analysis on page 171). Therefore, appendix A includes two guides to help you determine which of this book’s tools and techniques are most useful to your current assessment: *Tools and Techniques to Consider* (see page 265) and the *Guide to Selecting Tools and Techniques* (see page 269).

When deciding among your options, especially when leading a group toward a decision, it can be helpful to limit the number of potential solutions that are presented. Offering too many options may lead to decision paralysis or create unrealistic expectations of what can realistically be achieved.¹⁸ You may, for instance, want to complete an initial review of the options to remove any that are not going to meet the minimal standards for a workable solution

(for example, it is beyond the project's budget). You should inform the group of the options that were removed and why, but then focus the group on analyzing the remaining options to see which can best achieve the desired results within the constraints of your context.

How Do You Know When You Are Done with Your Needs Assessment?

Your assessment should not end until you have enough useful information and knowledge to make the decisions that were the drivers of the assessment in the first place. Therefore, return frequently to the questions you are trying to answer as guides, thus ensuring that time and money are not lost chasing down information that will not help make the pending decisions. Your ability to provide well-informed recommendations regarding the answers to the questions will guide your needs assessment and will help you determine when your assessment is complete.

Needs are not, however, constant artifacts within organizations. New needs emerge on a regular basis, while old needs are either met or made irrelevant. Changes within the organization may shape the permanence of needs, such as when new leadership alters the strategic direction or when other improvement projects achieve desired results. Equally, external changes will influence and shape needs in your organization, such as when government policies shift or a natural disaster affects a community. As such, needs change over time just as individuals, organizations, communities, and whole societies change (see table 2.4). Although your assessment may be very accurate and useful today, it is important to monitor needs and update your assessment whenever significant changes are found.¹⁹

This instability of needs often requires that needs assessments become a “way of business” rather than a discreet activity; that is to say, although formal needs assessments may be done as time-limited projects, the assessment approach to informing decisions should become an inherent part of the organization's culture.

Most often the results of a needs assessment are summarized in an assessment report or presentation although often the assessment will continue on until the findings have been communicated to most of the assessment's partners. Technically, most definitions of needs assessment end the process when justifiable decisions have been made regarding the activities that will best improve performance. Nevertheless, the findings of the needs assessment are frequently the first resources to be used in the design, development, implementation, and evaluation of any improvement effort. Thus,

Table 2.4 Typology of Needs

Needs	Description	Examples
Continuing needs	Gaps in results that are known from previous assessment and are monitored in an ongoing manner	For a region of the country, the number of HIV/AIDS cases and the percentage of children completing a full course of primary education have remained relatively stable in relation to project goals for the last 10 years and continue to represent significant needs.
Changing needs	Gaps in results that adjust in size, scope, importance, or other characteristics in response to changes internal or external to your organization or community	A rural flood significantly reduces crop production, thereby sharply increasing performance gaps for a number of food- and health-related needs that had previously been stable for several years.
Emerging needs	Gaps in results that emerge when new desired results are identified, or when there are unforeseen changes in current performance	As a result of conflicts in a neighboring country, new immigration patterns are significantly altering the demands placed on local governments, thereby leading to new needs at a time when a large development partner announced a reduction in services in the area.

Note: Case studies that illustrate the various needs of developing countries are included in the United Nations (2004) needs assessment report on the Millennium Development Goals.

your involvement with the needs assessment will frequently lead to continuing contributions throughout the remainder of the improvement initiative (see box 2.5).

As you can see, defining the end to a needs assessment can be difficult for many reasons. Although the formal project steps may come to a close when the final report is written or when a summary presentation is given to stakeholders, the ongoing effects of the needs assessment will frequently keep you engaged in tracking needs over time, in assisting with improvement projects, and in managing subsequent assessment efforts.

Box 2.5 Continuing Role: An Example

If the results of your needs assessment suggest specific reforms to taxation policies to support early childhood development and the development of a rapid social response program within the Ministry of Community Development, then your experiences from completing the needs assessment will likely be of value in assisting in the development, implementation, improvement, and subsequent evaluation of those two activities.

After all, the needs assessment provides the foundation for the selected activities (identifying and defining the results they are intended to achieve), and it simultaneously provides the evaluation criteria on which decisions are made about how to improve results in the future.

What Should Go in a Needs Assessment Report and Presentation?

Although informal needs assessments typically end with just a decision or a choice, most formal needs assessments end with some form of report and presentation. The contents, length, format, and audience for the report and presentation are frequently defined by the norms within your organization. The intent of the report and presentation may be to communicate findings and recommendations to internal partners, external partners, or both. Or a written report may be primarily for external communications, whereas internally a short presentation to the project sponsors may be the custom. It just depends on your organization and the context of your assessment.

The contents of your needs assessment report may also vary widely as determined by several factors, including (a) the audience, (b) the format (for instance, website versus printed report), (c) the scope of the assessment (strategic, tactical, operational, or all three), (d) the type of needs identified (stable, changing, emerging, or all three), (e) the amount and types of data collected, (f) the number of alternative improvement activities considered, and (g) the importance of decisions to be made on the basis of the report (or presentation) (see table 2.5).

Executive summaries are often the most-read part of a report; thus, that section will typically require a significant amount of attention. A good executive summary is typically less than 10 percent of the length of the whole report, including the purpose and scope of assessment, methods used, results found, conclusions and recommendations, limitations, and other

Table 2.5 Typical Contents of a Needs Assessment Report and Presentation

Assessment report	Assessment presentation
Executive summary	Agenda
Introduction	Introduction
Purpose, goals, objectives	Purpose, goals, objectives
Needs	Executive summary
Methods for identifying needs	Needs
Data identifying needs	Methods for identifying needs
Actions considered	Data identifying needs
Methods for identifying alternatives	Actions considered
Data on alternatives	Methods for identifying alternatives
Criteria for comparing	Data on alternatives
Conclusions	Criteria for comparing
Decisions or recommendations	Conclusions
Acknowledgments	Decisions or recommendations
Annex: supporting data	Acknowledgments
Annex: tools and instruments	Additional resources

Note: In her book titled *First Things Fast*, Allison Rossett (1999) provides a useful discussion and set of examples for what can be included in a training-focused needs assessment report.

supportive information that could be important to readers and decision makers. Ideally, the executive summary previews the main report, thereby helping readers build a mental framework for organizing and comprehending the details of the report.

In your organization, however, the reality may be that most of your audience will read only the executive summary—with those most affected by the findings reading the full report. Therefore, many times a helpful heuristic when writing an executive summary is to assume that the audience will not read the full report; thus, you are pushed to be very clear and concise while you include all essential information for making decisions.

Throughout your report, use tables and graphics when appropriate to illustrate data. Readers (or viewers, in the case of a presentation) can benefit from images that summarize data in easy-to-read, easy-to-understand formats. Typically graphics are most valuable when you can illustrate the meaningful relationships among two or more variables in one image (for instance, trend data in the number of children completing a full course of primary education along with data on donor-funded projects completed within the country).

Depending on the context of your report or presentation (such as length, audience, or format), it is important to find an appropriate balance of details

and summaries. It can be tempting, for instance, to include pages and pages of detailed data that substantiate your conclusions in an assessment report. But if the audience for your report does not have time to review the data in detail, then it is not a necessary component. In such situations, you can post the detailed data on a web page for interested readers and can simply provide a summary in the written report.

At the same time, your report or presentation must provide enough detail to support your decisions (or recommendations). Readers (or viewers) frequently have high standards for needs assessments, often expecting the assessment to provide clear answers that guarantee future success—which, of course, is unrealistic. Nevertheless, you should strive to meet their standards by including enough data and information in the report or presentation to support your conclusions, recommendations, and decisions.

Finally, you must, as they say, have “thick skin.” Almost every needs assessment report or presentation leads to recommendations or decisions that some people support and others do not. The supporters often read the executive summary and are satisfied with the conclusions, even as the challengers closely examine every statement, method, data source, analysis technique, and conclusion to find flaws in your decisions or recommendations. And because needs assessments deal with people, organizations, and forecasting future results, there are bound to be imperfections in every needs assessment. At this point, all you can do is present the facts as honestly as possible. By following this book’s systematic processes—as well as by applying its tools, techniques, guides, and checklists—you can, however, minimize the flaws that challengers may use to discount your findings.

Notes

1. For additional information on managing a needs assessment project, you should review Jim Altschuld’s 2010 series of five books titled *The Needs Assessment Kit*.
2. The tobacco industry in the United States offers numerous high-profile examples of what happens when decisions are made outside the context of societal outcomes (especially when short-term profits are the dominant guide for decisions).
3. What Peter Drucker refers to as the “boundary conditions” when making decisions (that is, the specifications that answers must satisfy).
4. Based on Roger Kaufman’s definition of *needs*.
5. Based on the series of five books by Altschuld (2010).
6. Based on Nutt (2008).
7. See the five-book series by Altschuld (2010) for more on building an effective needs assessment committee.

8. Based in part on Klinder (2005).
9. Useful descriptions and guides for developing Gantt and PERT charts are available at http://www.ehow.com/facts_4844081_between-gantt-charts-pert-charts.html.
10. Research by Nutt (2008) illustrates that ending the needs assessment when the first viable solution is presenting will reduce the beneficial results of the decision.
11. The Kellogg Foundation offers a free guide for developing logic models at <http://www.wkkf.org/knowledge-center/resources/2006/02/WK-Kellogg-Foundation-Logic-Model-Development-Guide.aspx>.
12. You may also determine that current results do not have to be improved, just maintained. In those situations, you then want to ensure that any improvement activities resulting from your needs assessment do not negatively impact on current results.
13. More specifically, any need within an open system, which encompasses most organizations and organizational activities.
14. Such spreadsheet software programs include Microsoft Excel, OpenOffice Calc (free spreadsheet software), or Google Documents (free online spreadsheets).
15. Too many options can paralyze your ability to make a decision, increase expectations beyond what can realistically be met, or lead to extended second guessing of what you have decided (see Schwartz 2003).
16. Also see <http://www.needsassessment.org> for audio interviews on numerous training and nontraining performance improvement activities.
17. Based on Stolovich and Keeps (2009).
18. Schwartz (2003).
19. In the overview volume for his five-book series, Altschuld (2010) further identifies seven types of needs that can be examined in a needs assessment. Each category can also be considered in terms of needs that are constant, changing, or emerging.
 1. Present (short-term) and Future (long-term) Needs
 2. Severe vs. Slight Needs
 3. Maintenance/Upgrade Needs (that is, not needs now but will become if results are not maintained or upgraded)
 4. Collaborative Needs (that is, needs that span across multiple organizations and must be addressed together)
 5. Level 1, 2, and 3 Needs (that is, needs of those who receive services, needs of those who deliver services, and needs of the overall system to support the previous)
 6. Asset or Capacity Needs (that is, needs from the perspective of what is working and how to build on strengths)
 7. Retrospective Needs (that is, needs that are assessed during or at the end of a project in conjunction with a formative or summative evaluation)

References

- Altschuld, James W., ed. 2010. *The Needs Assessment Kit*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications. [A 5-volume series with individual titles]
- Altschuld, James W., and David D. Kumar. 2010. *Needs Assessment Phase I: An Overview* (Book 1 of *Needs Assessment Kit*). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
 - Altschuld, James W., and J. Nicholls Eastmond Jr. 2010. *Needs Assessment Phase II: Getting Started* (Book 2 of *Needs Assessment Kit*). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
 - Altschuld, James W. 2010. *Needs Assessment Phase III: Collecting Data* (Book 3 of *Needs Assessment Kit*). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
 - Altschuld, James W., and Jeffrey L. White. 2010. *Needs Assessment Phase IV: Analysis and Prioritization* (Book 4 of *Needs Assessment Kit*). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
 - Stevahn, Laurel A., and Jean A. King. 2010. *Needs Assessment: Phase V: Taking Action for Change* (Book 5 of *Needs Assessment Kit*). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Fitz-Enz, Jac. 2009. *The ROI of Human Capital: Measuring the Economic Value of Employee Performance*. 2009. New York: AMACOM.
- Greer, Michael. 1999. "Planning and Managing Human Performance Technology Projects." In *Handbook of Human Performance Technology: Improving Individual Organizational Performance Worldwide*, edited by Harold D. Stolovitch and Erica J. Keeps, 96–121. San Francisco: Pfeiffer.
- Kaufman, Roger. 1992. *Strategic Planning Plus*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publishing.
- . 1998. *Strategic Thinking: A Guide to Identifying and Solving Problems*. Rev. ed. Washington, DC, and Arlington, VA: The International Society for Performance Improvement and the American Society for Training and Development.
- . 2000. *Mega Planning: Practical Tools for Organizational Success*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- . 2006. *Change, Choices, and Consequences: A Guide to Mega Thinking*. Amherst, MA: HRD Press.
- Kaufman, R., H. Oakley-Brown, R. Watkins, and D. Leigh. 2003. *Strategic Planning for Success: Aligning People, Performance, and Payoffs*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Klinder, Bernie. 2005. "Step-by-Step Guide: 12 Steps to Project Management Success." <http://searchwinit.techtarget.com/news/1063152/Step-by-Step-Guide-12-steps-to-project-management-success>.
- Nutt, Paul. 2008. "Investigating the Success of Decision-Making Processes." *Journal of Management Studies* 45: 2.
- Rossett, Allison. 1999. *First Things Fast*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

- Schwartz, Barry. 2003. *The Paradox of Choice: Why More Is Less*. New York: Harper Perennial.
- Stolovich, Harold, and Erica Keeps. 2009. "Selecting Solutions to Improve Workplace Performance." In *2007 ASTD Handbook for Workplace Learning Professionals*, edited by E. Beich. Alexandria, VA: ASTD Press.
- United Nations. 2004. "Needs Assessment Report on the Millennium Development Goals." http://www.unmillenniumproject.org/documents/mp_ccsparer_jan1704.pdf
- Watkins, Ryan. 2007. *Performance by Design: The Systematic Selection, Design, and Development of Performance Technologies That Produce Useful Results*. Amherst, MA: HRD Press, and Silver Spring, MD: International Society for Performance Improvement.
- Watkins, Ryan, and Doug Leigh, eds. 2010. *Handbook for Improving Performance in the Workplace*. Vol. 2: *Selecting and Implementing Performance Interventions*. San Francisco: Wiley/Pfeiffer, and Silver Spring, MD: International Society for Performance Improvement.