APPENDIX A.6

Three-Phase Needs Assessment Process with Additional Details

This process is an expanded version of the three-phase needs assessment process introduced in section 2 (see page 50) as a useful guide for planning larger-scale assessments.[1] Each of the three phases is aligned with identifying, analyzing, and deciding as key tasks in completing any needs assessment, but the three-phase approach adds valuable details for managing an assessment from beginning to end. Use this guide in conjunction with the other implementation guides and tools included in appendix A to lead your next needs assessment.

Phase 1. Preassessment

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

1. With the sponsors of the assessment, determine the overall scope of the needs assessment.
    a. Determine what questions the needs assessment is intended to help answer.
    b. Or determine what decisions the results of the assessment are intended to inform.

2. Depending on the scope of the assessment, identify the primary performance issues that are leading to the needs assessment.*

   a. Much of the initial information on performance issues will be generated through informal or formal discussions among stakeholders. These discussions may occur in, for example, community assemblies, organizational retreats, or more meetings.

   b. Many documents can be useful in identifying the issues: strategic plans, annual reports, audits, oversight reviews, performance appraisals, and others. Depending on the focus of your organization, issues—such as missed deadlines, low productivity, increasing employee absenteeism, lagging customer satisfaction, a jump in client complaints, new policies, declining market share, increasing poverty, or spread of disease—could be identified.

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 be able to define objectives and select methods.*

4. With others, create a management plan for the needs assessment. See the checklist in Appendix A.2 for more details.

   a. Include what the project objectives are for the needs assessment and how those objectives are aligned with other strategic, tactical, and operational goals of the organization.

   b. Include the preliminary scope, context, boundaries, partners, time line, and budget for the needs assessment.

   c. Include the data that are required, the sources of information to be contacted, and the tools and techniques to be used to collect information.

   d. Include which tools and techniques will be used to analyze the data in order to create useful information and to make justifiable decisions.

   e. Include the political, technological, legal, economic, or social factor of the pending assessment that may realistically limit the results that can be accomplished, as well as contingency plans for significant events that may alter your assessment.

5. Validate your management plan for the needs assessment with the assessment's sponsors, colleagues, peers, clients, partners, 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-collection tools to verify that you capture the necessary information regarding both the current achievements and the desired accomplishments.*

   a. Ensure that data collection provides you with adequate information on both current and desired performance so that gaps in results (or needs) can be measured and prioritized. It is frequently tempting to focus on collecting information about how to solve problems or to implement predefined solutions, but that information is best left out of your needs assessment until needs are adequately identified and compared.

   b. Include in your review a mock analysis of the information that you might collect from sources. This mock analysis, or simulated report of findings, can identify weaknesses in your information-collection techniques that can be addressed before the actual implementation of the assessment.

3. Collect information using a variety of tools and techniques, and include sources that represent varying perspectives on the primary performance issues.

   a. Continue to focus your needs assessment on performance gaps (or needs) rather than on collecting information about potential causes or plausible solutions. If you do identify these items during your information collection, take notes on the good ideas so you can keep them for later. Inevitably, many respondents during your data collection will want to focus on offering plausible solutions, but for your assessment, you should redirect conversations to address all aspects of needs (such as existing performance issues, desired results, current results, and so on).

   b. Because it is easy to fall into the trap of discussing solutions rather than performance results, it is important to have structured (or at least semistructured) instruments or protocols to follow.*

4. Define needs that are based on performance gaps between current and desired results.
   a. Each need should have one or more indicators or performance measures that illustrate the size, scope, distinguishing characteristics, and relative importance of the need. To the extent possible, the comparison of information related to current performance and desired results should be measured on the same scale. For example, a good comparator for current and desired performance would be the number of HIV/AIDS patients receiving medicine versus the organization's objective for the number of patients to receive medicine.
   b. In contrast, if your current performance measurement involves the number of HIV/AIDS patients served, then an example of an imbalanced measurement relationship would be using the percentage of new HIV/AIDS cases in a country or region to determine the desired performance. Both could be useful measurements, but—to the extent possible—you want to have "apples to apples" comparisons. That is, we must measure the same phenomena for the current and desired situations. At the same time, you are not restricted to having a single type of measurement, and it is possible—and often good practice—to have multiple *sets* of measurements for both current and desired performance.*
5. Establish an initial prioritization of needs on the basis of size, scope, distinguishing characteristics, and relative importance.*
   a. Rough estimates of the costs to close each performance gap, in comparison with the costs associated with not closing the performance gap, can be useful in establishing priorities. Costs are not restricted to financial costs; they can also be costs related to time, socioeconomic factors, political desirability, and so on. Rough estimates can be used here. In the next step, you will collect additional information to provide more detailed justification for establishing priorities.
   b. Work with internal and external organizational partners to review the information collected during the needs assessment and to set priorities. Decision-making techniques, such as nominal group or Delphi (see section 3), can be useful in setting priorities.
6. For the highest-priority needs, create a plan for collecting information about the factors that are likely leading to the performance gaps.*

a. Analyze each need for the causal factors (or root causes) that are linked to less-than-desired performance. In addition to seeking out gaps, also take an *appreciative inquiry* perspective about the needs so you can assess what is already working to accomplish desired results. In its simplest terms, appreciative inquiry is an approach that focuses on determining what works instead of the more typical approach of looking for problems. By building on what works and not simply focusing on problems, you can pursue opportunities where success is likely to occur.

b. Categorize potential causal factors to provide structure to your analysis when multiple types of causes exist. Common organizational factors include motivation, self-concept, workforce capacity, knowledge and skills of individuals, clearly defined expectations, appropriate and timely performance feedback, availability of resources, processes, organizational culture, incentives, rewards, recognition, and alignment of individual performance objectives with organizational vision and mission. Besides these factors, consider additional types for your situation, context, and organization.

    (1) Use the performance pyramid as a framework, for instance, to identify potential causal factors associated with each need (see page 236 in section 3B).

    (2) For each component of the pyramid, collect information to determine if factors within that area are linked to discrepancies in performance.

7. Collect information regarding the causal factors (or root causes) associated with priority needs.

    a. For each potential causal factor that you identify, use the appropriate tools and techniques to collect information that illustrates its potential effect on the desired performance. To collect the necessary information for determining the association of the causal factors with the identified needs, use document reviews, task analysis, job analysis, performance observations, dual-response surveys, focus groups, and other techniques.

    b. Rarely will a priority need be associated with only a single causal factor. Therefore, to be sure that your assessment includes multiple perspectives, use a variety of techniques to collect information, and don't rely exclusively on either soft data (which are not independently verifiable) or hard data (which are independently verifiable).

8. Analyze and synthesize the useful information you have collected.*
   a. Review the data from multiple perspectives, and also ask partners in the assessment to examine the data so you ensure that the analysis or synthesis does not represent potential biases about the needs, wants, or potential solutions.
   b. Analyze and synthesize the information you have collected using appropriate quantitative (mathematical or statistical) or qualitative (described in terms of words or images rather than numbers) techniques.
   c. Reflect on your findings, and apply your professional judgment.
   d. Include in your analysis the descriptions of possible improvement activities (solutions)—which were identified during the assessment—for each need.
9. For each priority need and its associated causal factors, identify multiple performance-improvement activities that, in combination, could address the complete need.*
   a. Identify at least two improvement activities linked to each recognized causal factor. Many activities will address several causal factors. For instance, a mentoring program may address causal factors associated with motivation, feedback, expectations, and recognition. Likewise, having identified options, you can compare alternatives by effectiveness, efficiency, and cost-benefit ratios.
   b. Verify the alignment of possible improvement activities with the identified causal factors and the performance gap. In the end, not every causal factor will be addressed with a unique improvement activity, but you should explore options for each identified causal factor so that you can find synergies and overlaps that may be useful when evaluating your options.
   c. As a useful starting place for establishing priorities, estimate the costs to close each performance gap in comparison with the costs associated with *not* closing the performance gap. More detailed prioritizations will also require estimating the costs of alternative activities. For example, to address employee motivation issues, estimate the cost of offering a training program versus offering a mentoring program versus offering a bonus program.
10. Evaluate each potential performance-improvement activity to assess its value to your improvement effort.*

a. Single solutions or improvement activities rarely accomplish sustainable improvements in performance; therefore, you should work to identify an appropriate combination of activities that will accomplish desired results. Evaluate the likely effectiveness and efficiency of each proposed activity as well as of differing combinations of activities.

b. Explore the potential suboptimization of activities—and combinations of activities—to ensure that improvements in one aspect of performance do not come at the cost of decreasing performance in other areas.

11. Use the information to prioritize needs and to make recommendations regarding the improvement efforts that will best achieve desired results within the given context.

    a. Consider the long-term goals and objectives of the organization, employees, clients, countries, and others when setting priorities.

    b. Take into account the social, political, technological, cultural, legal, and ethical factors that influence setting priorities.

    c. With internal and external partners, use decision-making tools and techniques to make decisions and recommendations for what actions should be taken.

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 activity 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 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.

*Typically, a good number of dependencies are identified in any needs assessment plan. The items noted with asterisks are tasks in a dependent relationship that must be completed before a subsequent task can begin.

Note

1. The three-phase needs assessment process is based on Jim Altschuld's 2010 book series, *The Needs Assessment Kit*, in which he provides guidance for managing an assessment through each of the three phases.