

Assessing Educational Needs: Some Strategic Questions for Facilitators

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Needs assessment is not simply a matter of knowing how to use various methods. It also involves knowing the answers to a number of strategic questions. Failure to answer these questions well can often lead to false starts, inappropriate or useless data, dead-ends, or lack of follow-up. Read each of the following questions and try to answer it (or them) in terms of a needs analysis project you are planning, or one you have recently undertaken. Note anything that you find significant, important, or relevant to that project in the space provided. Not all questions will be applicable to your project.

Some who have been involved in needs assessment have noted a certain maturing of approach described as follows:

- One enters a situation and defines their need(s) *for* them—implying that the outsider fixes them.
- One enters a situation and asks a series of questions in order to elicit *their* perceptions of *their* needs. The outsider, then, applies the solution(s) to their needs.
- The outsider and the group understand that the discovery and articulation of needs is a *mutual* process; that real needs are very difficult to perceive and describe, and that not all needs should be or can be resolved. We may have to learn to live with our need.

Specialists in needs assessment and those involved in organizational intervention have learned that it is the third approach that is most effective. Deep impressions will seldom be shared with detached outsiders; and in reality needs are most often too complex for simplistic solutions.

Strategic Questions for the Needs Assessment Facilitator

1. Whose needs? Theirs? Yours? Leaders? Individual or organizational needs? To what degree are your own interests influencing your interpretation?
2. Who is saying there is a need? Is the source in a position to know? Can it be trusted? Are there hidden motives? What other factors could be influencing the description of the need?
3. Do you know who the target audience is? If so, one of your tasks is to get to them and get information from them.
4. As you assess the information, is it a need or want? Do the people who need it, want it? If not, you have another kind of problem that may not be resolvable by educational means.
5. If you do obtain the needs/wants of the target audience, are you, or someone else, able and willing to do something about it? Do you have the resources? Authority? If not, you may be wasting yours and other's time or money.
6. Is it a learning problem? Or is the perceived need really a symptom of something else untreatable by training or education? For example, is it a performance problem, a

motivational problem, a resources problem? Can it be “fixed” more easily using other means?

7. Do you know what the end results (outcomes) should be? Are there standards, competencies and so on, against which to assess perceived need?
8. Is the respondent able to or in a position to identify his or her needs? Does she or he have to know something else first? Also to what extent are you likely to get responses from respondents about what they think you want to hear?
9. Are you pretty sure of what you think the need is? In which case you could be simply validating what you already think you know. If you are not sure of the need, then you should choose approaches that are broad, open-ended, and collect unanticipated data.
10. Have you considered all the stakeholders? Who thinks there is a need? Is there agreement among the stakeholders? Disagreement? What is the nature of the agreement and disagreement?
11. Do you have a sense of the politics of a situation? What underlying dynamics will affect what you do? Does someone have a preference? Can it be ignored?
12. Who should be involved in the data gathering and for what reasons?
13. Do you know what information you want? What questions you need to ask? What will assist your ability to make good judgments about information you need and questions that need to be asked?
14. Will you have an opportunity later to fine-tune your needs assessment with this group? For example, will you have a chance to get feedback from this group after a learning experience? If not, how will this affect what you do?