NEEDS ASSESSMENT

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ASSESSMENT
for Organizational Success

Chapter 1

Needs Assessment and Performance Improvement

What's in This Chapter?

- How to clearly justify your organization's direction

- Understanding your assessment choices and how to relate means and ends

- Defining "needs" as a gap in results, not a methods, means, or resource discrepancy

- The relationship between needs assessment and evaluation

- How to ensure stakeholder participation and buy-in

Finding Your Way

It is important to make certain that you and your organization are headed in the right direction; this means that you have justified exactly where you are headed and you know how to tell when you have arrived. Finding the right direction is absolutely vital. This chapter provides the basic concepts and tools to assure that when you do needs assessment, you have valid and reliable data upon which to make, and justify, decisions.

The precise definition of words and concepts are absolutely vital, and even if some words sound familiar, we provide unique definitions for many. It is more than semantics and being precise is central to your success.

Introduction: Setting the Right Destination

Most journeys we take are considered successful if we arrive at the right place, at the right time, and in good condition. The "right place" is vital. Identifying where you should head and justifying why you should get there will provide you with the critical data upon which to do planning, design, development, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation. Likewise, performance is not merely about what we do or how we do it, it is first and foremost about accomplishments (or "arriving" at a desired and appropriate destination).

When we talk about improving performance, we are talking about improving our accomplishments, the results of what we do and how we do it. It does us little good to improve what we do and how we do it, if it doesn't improve the results we want to accomplish. First, we define the results we want to accomplish; and then we consider what we should do and how, in order to accomplish them. And that is where needs assessment comes in. It provides concrete data on where you should head, why you should go there, and how to tell when you have arrived. Here are some journey tips and thoughts to consider.

Avoid flaws in conventional thinking and models. If there is a universal mistake in how organizations decide how to improve their effectiveness and efficiency, it's that they tend to start development without a proper review to:

- Ensure that their objectives (including visions and missions) are still appropriate and have enough specificity so that people can appropriately plan to meet them.

- Provide rigorous and clear criteria for management, development, evaluation, and continual improvement. Conventional practice for organizational improvement denies itself the data about where the organization should be going, how to know when it is having success, and how to manage improvement in the organization.

An analogy might be if an airliner left its home airport with no better guidance than "to have a good trip to San Diego," without a practical, tangible, and agreed upon navigation plan for getting there. Conventional practice values quick action under the guise of decisiveness, and often, quick action leads to costly mistakes. Quick action in and of itself is not a bad thing, if it doesn't entail picking solutions before understanding problems and opportunities.

Start with a needs assessment to provide the data for front-end alignment to ensure you're going to the right place. The first action proposed in this book is a pragmatic needs assessment. The approach in this book will remedy the problems lurking in current approaches by focusing on useful ends defined in measurable performance terms. If someone didn't challenge the status quo in measurable terms, we would still be living on a flat earth. This

book defers approaches, methods, means, activities, and tools until all organizational effectiveness and improvement partners can measurably articulate, justify, and communicate where to head and why go there. This approach avoids "solutions in search of problems" and starting out a journey with vague notions of where to head (for example, "be world class," "excellence," "delighted customers," "become number one").

A serious organization measurably determines where it is and should be headed, and then concerns itself with arriving on time and in good condition. Then it decides on how to get there. All three are important, but first and foremost we define "where to head."

The sensible road map for a successful journey—for measurably improving what your organization contributes—is based on the general performance improvement process: Assessment, Analysis, Design, Development, Implementation, and Evaluation (AADDIE) (Guerra, 2003), depicted in Figure 1.1. This is a more responsive framework than the conventional ADDIE framework because it doesn't assume that one knows what to analyze, but first assesses where one should head.

The major emphasis of this book is on needs assessment, causal and other types of analyses, as well as the ongoing linkage from needs assessment to evaluation and continual improvement.

Choosing the proper destination for organizational improvement and organizational effectiveness involves change, choices, and consequences (Kaufman, 2006). Change is inevitable and it is a matter of whether you become the master of change or the victim of it. This leads to choices: Do you choose to create a new and better future or just react to it? And then there are consequences of your choices about the change. Do you measurably add value to your organization or do you subtract value?

The choices are yours and your organization's to make and the consequences are yours to realize. Hesitant to make choices? Not making a decision is a decision (Greenwald, 1973). When facing uncertainty, which seems to always be with us, management expert Peter Drucker advises us, "If you can't predict the future, create it." This approach to needs assessment will allow you to define and create the better future for you and your organization. And that means tangibly defining and delivering success; success that you can prove.

Defining and arriving at the right place (at the right time and in the right condition) is facilitated by needs assessments. We'll define what that is and then tell you about the underlying concepts and tools that can help you deliver organizational improvement and success.

Figure 1.1   AADDIE Model

| Assessment	• Identify gaps in results (What Is vs. What Should Be) • Prioritize gaps based on the costs and consequences
Analysis	• Identify causes for gaps • Identify solution criteria based on gaps
Design	• Select or derive solutions/means based on solution criteria
Development	• Produce solution/means based on design specifications • Formatively evaluate and modify solution/means
Implementation	• Prepare for change • Implement solutions and manage change
Evaluation and Continual Improvement	• Formatively evaluate progress and revise as required • Summatively evaluate impact and continue to revise as required

Ends vs. Means

Measurable performance improvement starts with identifying the ends we want to accomplish (not the means we prefer) and then determining our current position with regards to those ends. The distinction between ends and means cannot be overstated.

- **Ends** are results, impacts, and consequences. They are what happens after we use and do something.
- **Means** are the ways we achieve ends. They are the how-to-do it.

Both are important, related, and different. Ends define where we should finish and the means (the right means) get us there. Figure 1.2 further defines these two important elements.

Figure 1.2   Differentiating Ends vs. Means
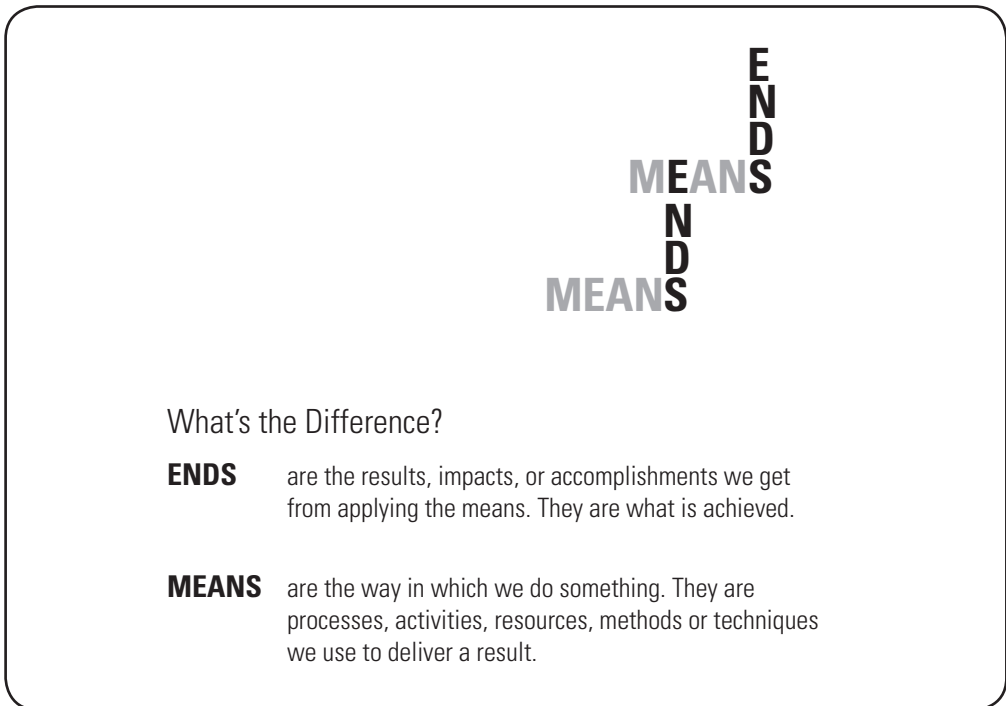
Source: Kaufman, R. (2011). *The Manager's Pocket Guide to Mega Thinking and Planning.* Amherst, MA: HRD Press.

What Is a Need?

If we are going to assess needs, and use them to set our direction and planning to achieve organizational success, let's define some terms. First, let's define: What is a *need*? A *need* is a gap between current results (and consequences) and desired results and consequences.

Figure 1.3 illustrates this definition of a need as a gap between current and desired results and the consequences of that gap.

The Inherent Conflict of Language

Ordinary language usage provides a challenge for conducting a useful needs assessment. Common usage of "need" often takes us to solutions—we *need* more money, we *need* more time, we *need* more people, we *need* to outsource, we *need* to reorganize—and this always leads us to selecting and applying solutions (more time, more money, etc.) before we know the problem and before we know what results we should deliver. Thus, without thinking, people

unknowingly jump into solutions before defining and justifying a problem (a *problem* is a need—a gap in results—chosen for reduction or elimination). This book has an emphasis on results and relevant evidence. The quick way for you to be successful at needs assessment—and maintain a strategic focus—is to act on the realization that **need is a noun: a gap between current results and desired results. It is not a verb.**

Figure 1.3   Definition of Need
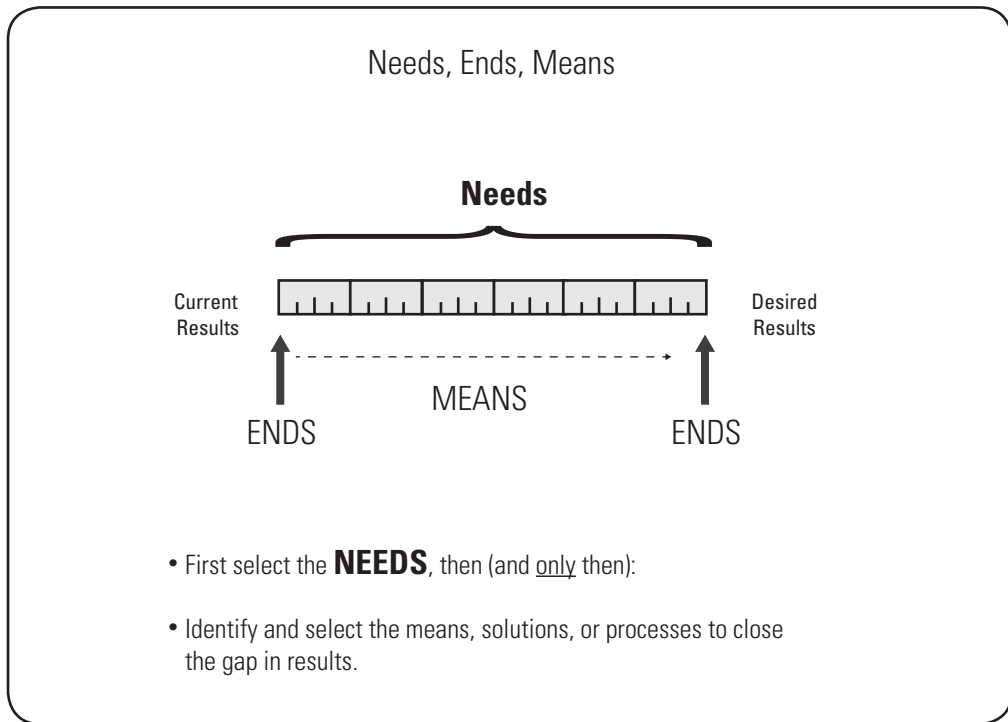
Source: Kaufman, R. (2011). *The Manager's Pocket Guide to Mega Thinking and Planning.* Amherst, MA: HRD Press.

If we use *need* as a noun, we will be able to justify both useful objectives as well as what we do and deliver. We will be able to provide valid rationale and evidence for everything we use, do, produce, and deliver. It is the only sensible way we can demonstrate value added.

By jumping into a solution (a means, methods, intervention, technique, or tool) through the use of *need* as a verb, disagreements often begin about what people want, rather than focusing stakeholders on what must be accomplished. We can argue almost endlessly about which means is better—training, Six Sigma, benchmarking, technology—if we don't define which gap in results a favored means will close. To reduce conflict and the practice of selecting

solutions in search of problems, go back to basics: First define the needs (as gaps in results) and then consider and select the means to close those gaps in results.

The Need Word

Need is an overused word. Just listen to everyday conversation, including perhaps yours. And the way the word is used conventionally in needs assessment often leads one to means before defining and justifying the ends to be accomplished. People confuse needs and wants (ends and means) all the time. And the consequences of getting these confused are not pretty. Ever hear a family member say things like:

> *I need a new car.*
>
> *I need more time.*
>
> *I need him/her.*
>
> *I need more technology.*
>
> *I need more people.*
>
> *I need a new dress/suit.*
>
> *I need to go to the mall.*
>
> *I need more money.*

The difference between ends and means is clear, but it becomes blurred when we use need as a verb. When you use need as a verb, it is very demanding and takes away your choices. There are no longer options, just the solution (more money, more training, more benchmarking, new technology) that have been pre-selected. Thus, people are constantly picking solutions before they know the problems.

Now that we have a definition of *need*—a gap in results—we have the basis for starting to determine the objectives for our organization; for everything we use, do, produce, and deliver in terms of adding value outside our organization; for defining and justifying the right place for us to head and arrive. The tool for this is *needs assessment*.

What Is a Needs Assessment?

A *needs assessment* identifies gaps between current and desired results—not means—and places those in priority order on the basis of the costs to meet the needs as compared to the

costs to ignore the needs. These gaps are called needs, and needs chosen for resolution can also be referred to as *problems*. By defining need as the gap between current and required results, we have the basis for justifying not only where we should head but also the evidence for proving the costs of meeting the need—getting to the 'right' destination—as well as the costs for ignoring the need. We have to operate in an environment of trust, and trust is best built through objective evidence.

Defining need as a gap in results provides a triple bonus:

• You determine "what should be," which is derived on the basis of performance data; this becomes your objectives.

• You have the basic criteria for evaluation; you only have to compare the new distance between *What Is* and *What Should Be* based on the needs identified and justified.

• You have the basis for unimpeachable proposals because you can provide both the conventional "cost to meet the need" with the "costs to ignore the need."

Taking this approach has an additional organizational political benefit. If you provide such data in a proposal and it is turned down by the person making the project decision, then any responsibility for failure and the consequences shifts away from you.

Needs Are Not Wants, and Means Are Not Ends

It is critical to understand that there is a wide range of perceptions about what is called a need or a needs assessment. In fact, many so-called needs are not needs at all, but preferred wants. Likewise, many so-called needs assessments are not needs assessments, but rather a survey of wants. For example, picking training as a solution, and then asking your employees to come up with 10 reasons why they *need* training or in what areas they would like training is not a needs assessment. This is an example of how to justify preferred solutions through incomplete data (in this case, popular wants) without first collecting evidence about real gaps, actual causal factors, and a range of relevant options.

Needs Assessment vs. Needs (or Performance) Analysis

Variations of this process have also been referred to as performance analysis (International Society for Performance Improvement, 2011; Pershing, 2006), or assumed to be part of a front-end analysis (Harless, 1975), or a figuring things out (FTO) study (Zemke and Kramlinger, 1982).

However, we caution about blurring assessment with analysis, as one seeks to identify gaps in results, while the other seeks to understand the root causes and essential elements of such gaps. If we refer to a basic *Webster's* definition of analysis, we find that analysis is described as the process of studying the nature of something or determining its essential features and their relations. In this sense, both needs assessment and needs analysis are part of an essential and preliminary stage in any learning and performance improvement effort.

Needs assessment provides data about gaps in results, and therefore sets up the evaluation framework to be used when evaluating the solutions that were implemented to close such gaps (Guerra-López, 2008). Needs analysis should come after a needs assessment in order to provide data about the causal factors of the gaps, and therefore critical input about what solution alternatives should be considered to close such gaps. Indeed analysis is an important and supporting aspect of evaluation—and all performance improvement phases—as one should always seek to better understand gaps between What Is and What Should Be (or what was intended).

Training Needs Assessment Caveat

It is also worth noting the distinction between a performance-based needs assessment and a training needs assessment. The purpose of a training needs assessment is to identify "the things we must know before we train…." (Rossett, 1987, p. 14), which suggests we already know training is the solution to the performance problem. From a performance perspective, needs assessments can be conducted at various levels of organizational results, including strategic (external impact), tactical (overall organizational results), and operational (internal deliverables), independently of any pre-imposed solution(s).

Within an instructional context, needs assessments could be conducted at the learner level, either looking at gaps in knowledge, or preferably, looking at gaps in human performance and behaviors first, and then seeking to identify the relevant gaps in knowledge so as to better target desired results. This is echoed by Dick, Carey, and Carey (2009), who suggest that needs assessment, in the context of instructional design, begins by asking what learners must be able to do or perform, rather than what they must know (Guerra-López in Richey, 2012).

It is also worth noting that although sometimes the terms *needs assessments* and *evaluations* are used interchangeably, they are quite different.

Needs Assessment and Evaluation— Related but Different

While assessors and evaluators may share data collection techniques, the types of questions they seek to answer differ. In this sense, the roles of assessor and evaluator differ in purpose or function, rather than importance and methods. *Needs assessors* help define, justify, and create the future by providing hard and soft data for the identification of performance-based vision, aligned missions, and building-block objectives, as well as the gaps between current and desired results. Additionally, they help identify the best solutions for closing these gaps, and thereby ultimately reaching the organizational vision.

On the other hand, *evaluators* help to determine whether we did in fact reach the future we set out to create during the needs assessment process. One of the primary ways they do this is by determining the effectiveness and efficiency of the implemented programs and solutions, as well as the causal factors associated with any gaps between expected and accomplished results. Measurably improving organizational and individual performance depends heavily on these two roles and processes.

While both assessors and evaluators collect data with regards to the current results of process or activity, evaluators collect data to determine whether current results match the results expected from solutions (such as new programs, new technologies, new processes, training, or any other means we select to help us achieve our objectives) that have already been implemented. The assessor, in contrast, seeks to anticipate the expected return-on-investment of potential interventions before they are implemented by collecting data both about current results (What Is) as well as the potential results (What Should Be). With this data, decision makers are able choose among competing alternatives (Guerra-López, 2008).

Stakeholder Participation and Buy-In

Any successful organizational improvement effort is dependent on the involvement and buy-in of its organizational partners. Needs assessment is no different. You will want to include representatives of all relevant stakeholder groups in your needs assessment. If the very same people charged with defining and accomplishing the results that the organization commits to deliver are not part of the process, they will doubtfully be a willing partner after the fact. Moreover, the

needs assessment findings and recommendations will likely be met with skepticism and resentment, which only leads to failed improvement efforts.

While not every stakeholder has to be physically present in needs assessment activities, it is critical that they feel their interests are well represented and considered in the process. A comprehensive and representative stakeholder group should be identified for revisions, feedback, and approval. A subset of this group should form a more active core work group that will collaborate closely with those needs assessors.

As you read through each of the needs assessment levels, keep in mind that all efforts are to be carried out as a needs assessment and planning team.

Needs assessment ensures that you are headed in the right direction, provides the criteria for designing and delivering success, and provides the criteria for determining if you were successful.

Chapter Summary

Organizational improvement and organizational success relies on defining and justifying where we are headed and how to know when we arrive. Needs are gaps in results, not in processes, methods, or means. Needs assessments identify the gaps between *current* results and their consequences and *desired* results and their consequences. They also will provide important data so we can identify the costs of meeting the needs as compared to the costs to ignore them. Needs assessments are not the same thing as needs analysis, performance analysis, or evaluation. In the next chapter we will introduce the basic tools you require to begin your needs assessment.