Needs Assessment Primer

A summary of the book *Needs Assessment: An Overview*, by James Altschuld & David Kumar

For use by Cooperative Extension Faculty Members

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Introduction

In Extension, needs assessment should be a part of program planning and evaluation. Many of us already intuitively recognize the importance of assessing need when developing or tweaking programs and many of us already use bits and pieces of information to help guide our program decision making. This is a good start, but this needs assessment primer will help you see that there are some structured ways to be thinking about needs assessment. Recognizing and even following the steps of more structured needs assessment can help us all craft more meaningful programs that serve our desired audiences and can easily be evaluated on their ability to meet the needs of constituents. In many cases, needs assessment can foster positive and meaningful changes to the way we think about and develop programs.

Defining Need

Before we go too much farther, we need to clarify some terms. First, let's be clear about what a need is. In the context of a needs assessment, a need is the gap between two conditions:

1. What is (current state, situation, or condition) and
2. What should be (preferred or desired state, condition, or situation)

Need

The gap between what is and what should be must be measureable, which means that the two conditions must also be measurable. When the gap is not measurable, it means we cannot really know if there really is a need and we cannot easily determine if we ever satisfy the need.

Also, the gap between what is and what should be must have some consequence associated with it for it to be perceived as a need. If taking no action to reduce the gap will be perceived as acceptable or not problematic, then the gap is simply a gap and not a real need (at the moment). Between different needs, there are going to be different levels of risk or consequence for not meeting them. The weight of the consequence will help you determine which needs should be satisfied first.

Here's an example of a need:

A weed infested pasture: In this case, the difference between what is and what should be is the number of weeds/sq. foot in the pasture above desirable levels. Note that the two conditions are measurable. For example, imagine that currently there are 15 weeds per square foot in the pasture. This represents the current situation (what is). Then let's imagine that zero weeds per square foot is the desired condition (what should be) for this pasture. If the farmer/rancher perceives that there are consequences for not controlling the weeds, e.g. loss of revenue, disease to animals and other issues, this gap between zero weeds per square foot and 15/sq. foot represents a need to be fixed through actions to control/eradicate weeds.

In Needs Assessment, we also have to make a distinction between needs and solutions.

- Needs, not solutions have to be the main focus and concern of the assessment
- Unless a need is clearly identified we might not understand what good solutions are

Here's an example of a Needs Assessment that has too quickly jumped to solutions and muddled the concept of need:

Need, as defined by program developers: Students in 2nd grade need more time and drill in math to achieve higher scores on their proficiency tests.

- Is more time and drill a need? It looks more like a solution strategy than a need.
- Though the implied gap is that students are not achieving high enough scores in math, that is not clear from this needs statement.
- The problem with this statement is that a solution strategy is being referred to as a need. If the real need is for students in 2nd grade to improve their math proficiency test scores, any number of strategies may help that, like:
  - Improved teacher training
  - Altered instruction approach
  - Different curricula etc.
- By presuming this strategy (more time and drill in math) is the need, the program developers may be designing a program that fails to improve math proficiency test scores.

Determining "What is"

A major part of conducting a Needs Assessment is determining what the current condition is. Learning what the current condition is involves:

1. Gathering information that has already been collected on the topic from various sources
2. Gathering new information about the topic from various sources

Deciding on the "What Should Be" Condition

What should be is sometimes easy to define, e.g. blood pressure of a healthy adult, but in many cases it is vague and unclear (in education, socials programs, nature, etc.). What should be is the goal that we strive to reach, but everyone might think of that goal differently. Is the goal,

- What is minimally acceptable?
- What ought to be (ideal situation)?
- What is likely to be?
- What is expected to be?
- What is feasible?
- What might be the normative expectation?

There is no one answer, because the goal of what should be reflects each individual's core values. In a needs assessment the "what should be" condition must be mutually agreed upon by decision makers, though. Reaching agreement will likely take some conversation, so anticipate that for your needs assessment.

Here is an example of a "what is" and "what should be" statement that has two possible goal conditions:

What is	Ideal What should be	Likely What should be
Immunization: inoculation rate for kids is 70-75% in 2012	90-95% of kids will be inoculated in 2013	80% of kids will be inoculated in 2017

Whose needs matter?

There are essentially three levels of individuals whose needs matter:

Level 1: Clientele being served by an organization or agency

Level 2: The employees, who directly interact with clientele, of the organization or agency

Level 3: Administrators of the organization or agency

Needs for those who receive services (level 1) are the ones that should be considered first in our needs assessment, followed by employee needs (level 2) and then the needs of administrators (level 3).

Conducting a Needs Assessment

To carry out a needs assessment you need to identify needs, prioritize these needs, make needs-based decisions, allocate resources, and implement actions to resolve the identified problem. A needs assessment has three phases:

1. **Pre-assessment**: Get organized and find out what is already known
2. **Assessment**: Gather new data about the need if necessary
3. **Post-assessment**: Design and implement solutions

You'll note that taking action to solve the problems underlying the need is part of needs assessment. Needs assessment should not be undertaken unless people are ready to act on the needs identified.

These are the key questions guiding all phases of a needs assessment:

1. What is the current situation for clientele, employees, and administrators?
2. What should the situation be?
3. If there is a gap between what is and what should be, then:
    a. What are the consequences for not changing the current situation?
    b. What is causing the gap?
    c. What are some possible solution strategies to reduce the gap?

Phase 1 – Pre-Assessment

1. **Get Organized**

    The first step is to focus the needs assessment by asking program decision makers for background information about the issue of concern. These types of questions are typically asked:

    - What issue or problem concerns them?
    - What do they know about it right now?
    - What information has led them to this knowledge?
    - Are clientele, employees, or administrators most affected by the problem?
    - Programmatically, what is currently being done in the organization to address the problem?
    - Are they considering offering new services?
    - Is their program going to back this needs assessment endeavor, regardless of findings?
    - What do they think is causing the problem?
    - Are there historical events associated with these problems?
    - If there are different points of views, which individuals or groups hold them and why do they hold them?
    - Is this really a high priority?
    - Has their program looked at this before? If so what was done and what was learned?
    - Any prior evaluation on this project or program?
    - Are people from an earlier effort available for discussion?
    - Previous data collection strategies accessible?
    - Has any organization done this kind of assessment before?

    Note that sometimes you will be the program decision maker asking these questions of yourself.

    These questions should illuminate to you the nature of the problem facing the organization, preliminary information about the "what should be" condition and "what is" state, the individuals and groups that make up the three levels (clientele, employees, and administrators), and other key issues. Use this information to formulate a plan for the next phases of the assessment.

Clientele with Physical Disabilities in Extension Example: Employees and administrators perceive a problem with the way they accommodate clientele with physical disabilities, so the administrators call for a needs assessment. The individuals they ask to conduct the needs assessment meet with a few administrators and employees to learn more about the issue. The needs assessors learn that there is anecdotal evidence that some clientele with special needs show up for programs and employees don't have the equipment or ability to accommodate them. They also learn that serving these clientele are a high priority for the organization. No one in the organization has looked at this problem before on an organization-wide scale, but the suspicion is that the organization simply hasn't established a system to support and accommodate clientele with physical disabilities.

The needs assessors determine that they will examine the gap between the number of people with physical disabilities being served by Extension and the number of people with physical disabilities Extension should be serving.

2. Form a Needs Assessment Committee (NAC)

A Needs Assessment Committee (NAC) is a small group of people formed by the needs assessor to help gather data, brainstorm ideas and prioritize decision making for actions identified in the needs assessment. It is recommended that an NAC group be a part of all needs assessments.

- Members should include a cross section of stakeholders/clientele/partners
- Avoid very strong personalities or excessive talkers
- Consider prior history if there are groups or committees that have been included before and should remain connected?
- Make deliberate choices, don't just pick a random group of people with the time to serve
- One member should have data analysis skills if the needs assessment leader does not
- Members should include power brokers and coalition makers
- Members should include stakeholders with vested interests in the outcomes of study
- Ensure that the NAC has access to decision makers and can influence decisions
- Ideally have fewer than 10 people in the NAC but if larger, divide NAC into sub-committees

Clientele with Physical Disabilities in Extension Example: An NAC is formed of 8 people, including administrators who have been presented with the issue by employees, employees who have worked with clientele with physical disabilities, and clientele with physical disabilities who have a history with the organization and have a desire to see the organization succeed. The NAC has been sanctioned by the organizational administration and reports to them on a regular basis.

3. **Learn as much as possible about preliminary "what should be" and "what is" conditions from available data sources**

   The Needs Assessment Committee (NAC) should gather information from many sources to find out what the current conditions are related to the problem, what the goal is for the issue, if there is a gap, and if so, what the consequences of it are, what the causes of the gap are, and possible solutions. Information may come from:

   - Databases in which data about this issue or audience are stored and easily accessible
     - User records, logs, social indicators, demographic data, census data, epidemiological studies, and so forth
   - Local documentation records
     - Libraries
     - Non-profit organizations
     - Newspapers
     - Chamber of commerce etc.
   - Prior project materials
   - Related articles from any local source(s)
   - Conversations with faculty who held your position before, retired department heads, or administration officials

   Collect enough information to have a solid grasp on what is readily available about the topic, but don't get bogged down with tons of data sources because it will be harder to synthesize for decision making.

Clientele with Physical Disabilities in Extension Example: The NAC and faculty assigned to the needs assessment ask Program Leaders if they have information about the clientele in their areas that have had physical disabilities. The needs assessment group also looks for data from the US Census Bureau on the prevalence of people with physical disabilities in Oregon, as well as any additional information about people with physical disabilities in the state.

It turns out that a few of the program areas have gathered some information about clientele with physical disabilities, but it is spotty and somewhat dated. Census Bureau data is available, however.

4. **Synthesize the data, make it meaningful, and decide to move on to Phase II or Phase III**

After gathering all known information about the needs subject, it is time to make sense of the data. With the help of a data specialist or NAC group:

A. Synthesize data by considering the quality of each source and analyzing the data using sound quantitative or qualitative methods
B. Render the data into a form that can be useful for making decisions. Use the KISS principle (Keep it Short and Simple)
C. Determine meaningfulness, that is:
    - Is the data useful for decision making?
    - Can the data be grounded in people's experiences?

Then meet with the NAC to discuss the data from known information sources and discuss if there are gaps in the information gathered. At that point it should become clear if more information is needed to really know what the current situation is and what the goals are. If there are information gaps, the NAC should discuss if all avenues for gathering pre-existing information have been exhausted. If so, the group should decide to move on to Phase II, in which more data using other methods such as surveys, focus groups, community interviews, tests, forums etc. are gathered. These questions are useful guides for that NAC meeting:

- What is the group's comfort with what is now known about the need?
- Is the need still perceived to be important?
- How do we move forward with what we now have?

If the NAC determines that there are no gaps in the information gathered – that there is enough information already available to give them a solid grasp of the current situation and the desired goals – then the group should decide to move on to Phase III. Phase III is when action strategies can be explored, so long as the need is still important to address.

Clientele with Physical Disabilities in Extension Example: The NAC and faculty assigned to the needs assessment now know the total number of people with physical disabilities in the state, but it is still unclear how many people with physical disabilities the whole of Extension is serving. Also, it is not clear what the targeted number of people with physical disabilities to be served by Extension really is.

After discussing these findings, the NAC decides to move on to Phase II, in order to learn more about how Extension is serving clientele with physical disabilities and what the goal is for serving this population.

Phase 2 - Assessment

Phase 2 is only used if Phase 1 did not yield data to give you enough understanding about needs to develop solution strategies. Phase 2 involves collecting new in-depth data about:

1. What is the current situation for clientele, employees, and administrators?
2. What should the situation be?
3. If there is a gap between what is and what should be, then:
    a. What are the consequences for not changing the current situation?
    b. What is causing the need (the gap)?
    c. What are some possible solution strategies to reduce gap?

The same assessment questions guiding Phase 1 guide Phase 2, the only difference is that in Phase 2 additional time and resources have to be allocated to the collection of new data to answer the questions.

Quantitative Data Collection Methods

The most common quantitative data collection method is the survey. If you decide to conduct a survey, please consult the numerous texts on survey development, implementation, and analysis available at the Valley Library or ask for the help of colleagues who have successfully used these methods in the past. Some useful texts include:

Czaja, Ronald and Johnny Blair. (1996). *Designing Surveys: A guide to decisions and procedures*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press.

Dillman, Don. (2007). *Mail and Internet Surveys: The Tailed Design Method*. 2nd Edition. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Fowler Jr., Floyd J. (2002). *Survey Research Methods*. 3rd Edition. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Groves, Robert M., Floyd Fowler Jr., Mick Couper, James Lepkowski, Eleanor Singer, and Roger Tourangeau. (2004). *Survey Methodology.* Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Levy, Paul S. and Stanley Lemeshow. (2008). *Sampling of Populations: Methods and Applications.* 4th Edition. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Surveys

This is a very brief overview of the survey method and should only be used to guide broad decision making about survey development and implementation.

Surveys should only be conducted if:

- Information from a broad cross-section of people will be unique and different from what is already known about the topic
- There are adequate resources and time for the development, implementation, analysis, and interpretation of the survey
- The gains outweigh the costs

Survey development and implementation takes time. It is important to be very thoughtful at this stage, because the time of survey respondents is limited and valuable. Here are some basic steps to follow when developing a survey:

1. Determine your broad survey questions, which should relate to:
    - What is?
    - What should be?
    - What are the consequences for not changing the current situation?
    - What is causing the need (the gap)?
    - What are some possible solution strategies to reduce gap?
2. Decide on who should be surveyed (the people best-suited to answer these questions)
    - If you identify clientele, employee groups, and administrators then it is likely that you'll need to develop separate survey instruments for each of those groups.
    - If your target group is relatively small in number, sending a survey to everyone may be pretty easy and inexpensive.
    - If your target group is relatively large in number, then it may be best to send surveys to only a sample of that population.
3. Develop your specific survey questions
    - Tailor the questions to the people being surveyed
    - Consider how the data will be analyzed to ensure that the questions will yield useable answers that can inform the needs assessment
    - Only include questions that will inform the needs assessment. Including interesting, but not useful questions may affect your response rate and will waste the time of your survey respondents.
    - Pre-test the survey with four to six members of the target population to make sure the questions are valid and reliable. For instance, ask them what they think various terms mean on the survey to reveal if everyone ascribes the same meaning to the terms. If everyone ascribes the same meaning to a term, and that meaning is the meaning you intended, then the question is reliable and valid. If everyone ascribes the same meaning, but that meaning is different than what you intended, then the question is reliable, but not valid.
4. Write out the introductory email(s), letter(s), or script(s) that will be used to inform survey respondents of their selection and the importance of their participation in the survey.
5. Determine the format and delivery system to be used for the survey
    - Web-based surveys (SurveyMonkey™, Qualtrics™, and others)
    - Mail survey
    - Combination of web-based and mail
    - Paper survey to be handed out when target population is convened somewhere
    - Consider reminding people to respond to the survey at least once, a week after the initial survey was delivered

    - Pilot test the survey with a small number of people from your target population to make sure the delivery system works the way you intend
6. Formulate a data analysis and presentation plan
7. If you intend to share the results of the survey with audiences outside of your organization, then prepare and submit an application for Institutional Review Board (IRB) review of your study.

Being thoughtful in the survey development phase will pay off in the survey implementation and analysis phases. Survey implementation directly follows development and should go without a hitch with proper planning. Analysis follows implementation and should be straightforward, provided you thought carefully about how the data will be useful to the needs assessment and decision makers. Analysis of needs assessment data typically does not require complex statistical methods. Summaries of percentages, averages, and themes are usually all that are required. What can get more complex is the display of the data for decision makers who are not as close to the data as the analyst. Graphs are often helpful for conveying information about gaps.

Qualitative Data Collection Approaches

Qualitative data can come from group forums, focus groups, nominal group techniques, key informant interviews, observations, open-ended portions of surveys, and other methods. Typically, qualitative methods are best at yielding data that show what people's perceptions are of the problems, concerns, needs, and the "what should be" conditions for needs assessment. If you decide to use qualitative methods to collect assessment data and you have plans to share the results in a peer-reviewed publication or other type of public document then you should submit an IRB application before collecting the data.

Community group forums, focus groups, and nominal group techniques all represent methods that capitalize on group processes to gather data. Because they rely on groups, there are some issues unique to these methods to consider related to planning, questioning, and facilitation. Here are some features of qualitative data collection methods that involve group procedures for needs assessment to consider:

1. Planning
    - Make sure that a group process will add useful information and credibility to the assessment relative to its cost.
    - Assign someone to manage the logistics of the process:
        - Location (need a large room for community group forums and more intimate rooms for focus groups and nominal group technique)
        - Table setup (roundtables for focus groups and nominal group interviews)
        - Formal invitations to participants
        - Recording procedures (audio recording, videotaping, note-taking, etc.)
        - Refreshments
2. Clarify the purpose
    - Each method has a unique purpose

  - *Community group forums* are moderately large group procedures to obtain feedback on the direction of a needs assessment, a sense of community perceptions about an area, and a sense of issues
  - *Focus group interviews* lead to understanding of what a small, homogeneous, group of individuals thinks about an issue; what words group members use in referring to it (useful for developing a survey); what individuals might be prone to do regarding a problem; and what they think might be causing it.
  - *Nominal group technique* is a small-group technique that rapidly generates and prioritizes ideas and minimizes "groupthink"
- Also consider how the data will be incorporated into the needs assessment to complement other data

3. Determine sampling procedures
   - *Community group forums* are moderately large (40-60 participants) cross-sections of people with a stake in the areas being studied.
   - *Focus group interviews* are small (7-12 participants) and homogeneous on an important variable related to the content of the interview (e.g., parents of teens at risk for drug use or primary-grade teachers specializing in mathematics).
   - *Nominal groups* are small (8-12 participants) and may be heterogeneous, but should not mix subordinates with their superiors as this may stifle open expression of ideas.
4. Establish general ground rules and specific details of method procedure
   - A person should not be interrupted when speaking
   - Everyone will be called upon to speak
   - Points should be made directly and succinctly
   - Discussion should be directed toward target by facilitator
   - Some ideas and thoughts may be put in a parking lot for later discussion
   - For *focus groups*, 5-10 questions should be asked that require description and explanation, not yes/no responses. For example:
     - i. What have you liked most about the nutrition education classes you've taken through Extension?
     - ii. What have you liked least?
     - iii. Why did you like or not like these things?
     - iv. What problems have you encountered with these classes?
     - v. How have the problems been resolved?
   - For *nominal group techniques*, the following steps must be followed:
     - i. Provide a brief introduction to the topic
     - ii. State the rules, noting that discussion only occurs at the end
     - iii. Participants silently brainstorm and write down comments for each of the topics or prompts supplied for this purpose, such as "what might be the implications if we made this change to Extension? (List as many as you can)" "What do you think are the major forces that will affect Extension in the next 5-10 years? (List as many as you can)"

iv. Move through the group (a round robin) where each person offers one item from his or her list, which is placed on a board or overhead
   - If an idea is not clear, ask the person to clarify, but not provide rationale

v. Ask and record how many people had similar ideas

vi. Have them cross similar ones off their own list

vii. Proceed until no more ideas are given

viii. Prevent discussion during the collection of ideas

ix. Combine items where possible

x. Each person individually and silently picks his or her top 5 or 10 items

xi. Collate rankings or selections

xii. Put in rank order

xiii. Conduct a general discussion of the results at this point only

5. Select appropriate leadership for facilitation with the following qualities:
   - Able to set a tone that is open and gets people to invest in the process and voice their opinions even if different from those of others
   - Maintains control and keep the group moving forward in an engaged way
   - Appreciates group processes: when to listen, summarize, probe, and tolerate "pregnant pauses" when people are collecting their thoughts
   - Establishes the right amount of rapport – too little and the group may not respond, and having too much may cause group members to try to please the facilitator instead of being honest
   - Must be alert to tabling ideas and when to gently and softly close off responses from people who run on too long or have an ax to grind
   - Ideally has had such experience before
   - Should not represent a point of view, especially that of management
6. Implement the meeting
   - Provide an agenda, name tags for smaller groups, and explain why they are there
   - Follow the plan you laid out, but recognize that there may be necessary deviations from it in order to really learn about the area of need.
7. Report on the meeting
   - As soon as possible, debrief the forum, focus group, or meeting
   - Describe the atmosphere of the meeting and the main themes that arose, combining all team members' ideas into one document
   - In the final report, describe the meeting context along with agendas, questions asked, nature of the discussion, and a listing of attendees (with IRB approval)
   - Describe the patterns that emerged from the all of the focus groups, forums, and meetings. Describe how they fit with what was already known about needs. Talk about their being consistent with or contradicting other data collected in Phases 1 and 2.

After the quantitative and qualitative data have been collected and analyzed, it's time for the NAC to move on to Phase 3, to prioritize needs and discuss possible causes, then meet with decision makers to devise and implement solution strategies.

Phase 3 – Post-assessment

At this phase, the needs assessment is ready to move into action planning. The NAC and decision makers should now have a complete picture of what is, what should be, and the consequences. They are ready to discuss the causes and ideas for solutions. It is advisable at this time to revisit the composition of the NAC and consider substituting some members with people who have more decision making power in the organization. In the post-assessment phase actions should be planned out in a strategic manner. Needs that are high priority should be the first order of business, so the first steps of Phase 3 involve prioritizing needs.

Prioritizing Needs

Needs can be short-term (can be resolved in about 3 years or less) or long-term (over 3 years). Since resolving short-term needs may lead to the resolution of long-term needs, it is important to first understand and address short-term needs.

It is recommended that in carrying out a needs assessment to:

1. Focus on short-term rather than long-term – initially
2. Identify needs of high priority to all involved but not necessarily the top one for a single group or organization that hopefully all other groups will agree on
3. Focus on needs that can be quickly resolved
4. Make sure need has ties to a mission of your department or organization

To prioritize needs the NAC should establish 3 to 5 criteria for the individual rating of need areas. There are many criteria that can be used, but here are some that are often used:

- Overall importance to the organization
- Number of people affected
- Size of need (gap)
- Risk to the organization if need was ignored
- Feasibility of the need being resolved by the organization
- Degree to which the need demands immediate attention
- Extent to which the data sources agree about the need
- Willingness of staff to resolve the need

Once the criteria have been selected, each member of the NAC should be asked to assign a 1-5 rating score (where 1 is low and 5 is high) to each need area for each of the criteria dimensions. Then those ratings can be aggregated with the ratings of other NAC members in any number of ways. Table 1 shows one way of aggregating the ratings of the members to show which need areas are higher priority to the group:

Table 1

Need Area	*# Affected*	*Importance to Org.*	*Risk to Org.*	*Size of Discrepancy*	*Sum*	*Priority*
1	3.5*	3.9	2.7	3.6	16.9	Lower rank
2	3.9	4.2	3.8	4.2	19.2	Higher rank
3						
N						

* The numbers in the cells are averages of ratings given by individual group members on a 1-5 scale, where 1 is low and 5 is high.

After the needs have been prioritized, the group should consider the causes of high-priority needs. One way of doing this is for the group to use the cause consequence analysis method depicted in Table 2 to more fully examine the need areas. The group could fill this table out together during a meeting.

Table 2

Prioritized Needs	*Causes*	*Consequences*	*Difficulty to correct*	*Criticality*
Need 1	List causes	What will these causes produce?	Rate causes from high to low difficulty	How critical is this particular cause to the need? Rate from 1 (low) to 5 (high)
Need 2				

After the causes have been identified for all of the high-priority needs, it is pretty easy to convert them into solution strategies. For example, if one of the causes for Extension Service not serving more physically disabled clientele is offering programs in locations that are not ADA accessible, then a solution strategy might be offering programs only in ADA accessible locations. Though the difficulty to correct this cause may be high, it is a potential solution.

The next step is for the NAC to prioritize solution strategies based on their feasibility. Feasible solutions to highly important needs should be acted upon first by the organization. These are some suggested criteria, but others can be added or substituted:

1. Instrumental value (ability of a solution strategy to have a positive impact on multiple needs)
2. Efficacy of solution strategy (ability of strategy to really reduce need)
3. Resource availability
4. Commitment to Change

The NAC can again rate the feasibility of each solution strategy based on each of these criteria to identify highly feasible solutions to high-priority problems during a group meeting using a table similar to Table 3.

Table 3

Solution Strategy	*Instrumental Value*	*Efficacy of solution*	*Resource availability*	*Commitment to change*	*Sum*	*Feasibility*
1	4.5*	3.5	3.2	4.1	15.3	Higher rank
2	3.9	4.2	2.9	3.9	14.9	Lower rank
3						
N						

* The numbers in the cells are averages of ratings given by individual group members on a 1-5 scale, where 1 is low and 5 is high.

Other issues to consider when deciding on a solution strategy to pursue include:

- Populations served (clientele, employees, or administrators)
- Staff training required
- Startup costs
- Continuation and/or maintenance costs
- Fit with current situation at organization
- Experience with solution strategy
- Advantages/disadvantages
- Could the solution have a negative effect on the situation?

The NAC should consider these issues and the feasibility of various solutions as they arrive at consensus about the best ones to pursue. The NAC should also seek out the best information about the proposed solution strategies to make a decision. Sometimes this can be done by identifying sites or locales that have implemented the solution, and learning from them.

Once the NAC has reached consensus about one or more solutions for the highest-priority organizational needs it is ready to propose them to the organization for implementation. To do so, a sound rationale should be drafted and presented to decision makers and staff. That report or presentation might contain the following components:

- Brief, one-page overview of needs assessment process
- Needs in order of priority, including criteria used to judge priority
- Overview of strategies used to identify potential solutions to needs
- The solution most likely to resolve problems and that best fit the organization
- Recommendations for developing action plans
- Schedule for completing action planning and initial implementation of solution

After the NAC has presented its case and the proposed solutions have been deemed appropriate by the organization, the committee should draft a success map, program plan, or logic model that will spell out the path of strategy implementation and need reduction. That map will likely have these components: material development, procedure development, strategies for maintaining open communication about the process with members of the organization, evaluation strategy development, implementation steps, and achievement of objective (reduced need). At this point the NAC can likely disband, but some individual or group of individuals must be in charge of overseeing the implementation, if the need is to be addressed.

Conclusion

This primer was written to give you some insight into formal needs assessment. Many of the ideas discussed probably feel pretty familiar to you because of the way you have been intuitively doing needs assessment for a long time. As you can see, however, there are some nice and clear ways to be thinking about and doing needs assessment that may help you solidify the work you have already been doing. This primer is just an overview, however, and if you delve into the weeds of a needs assessment any time soon you will probably want some more information. For that, please refer to James Altschuld and David Kumar's book, or contact Sam Angima (sam.angima@oregonstate.du) or Lena Etuk (lena.etuk@oregonstate.edu).

To be successful at needs assessment, you need to develop assessment skills, have a good personality, experience, ability to adapt, and a willingness to live with ambiguity and interact with others. Remember that needs assessment can sometimes lead to political upheaval locally or within your organization, so it's important to understand the dynamics of your organization and the local groups you may be dealing with. Some needs assessments take three months to complete from start to finish, while others take over a year. The duration depends on the scope of the issue and the amount of information that has already been collected on the topic, so plan accordingly.