

# 1

## Beginnings



### ❖ WHY A KIT?

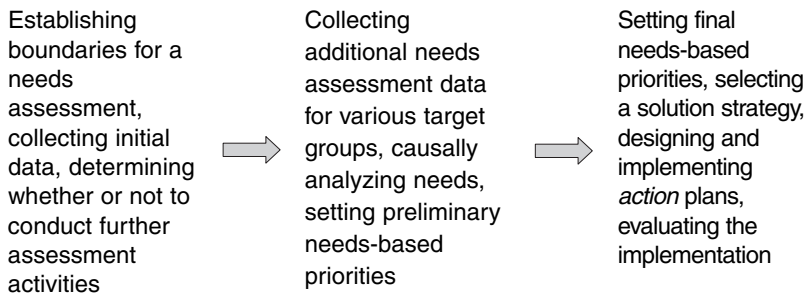
Much is known about needs assessment with many good sources available, so is this KIT really needed? Yet there is not a single location where a needs assessor can go for the full enterprise with some depth of focus—a place that provides comprehensive guidance and procedures for carrying out a needs assessment. Comprehensive means tables, examples, action steps, and techniques for conducting the assessment from initial conceptualization to identification and prioritization of needs, causal analysis of the problems underlying needs, utilization of results for needs-based action plans in organizations, recycling back to the process as necessary, and lastly evaluation of the endeavor.

Another reason for a KIT is that needs assessments often are not conducted as they should be in that they do not include the two basic conditions of a need (what should be and what is), and beyond that they do not lead to organizational change (actions, ways of thinking), prompting the question as to why they were undertaken in the first place. The process frequently has been treated in a piecemeal and fragmented fashion and to a high degree still is. Training for the conduct of assessments follows this pattern with it usually taught as a small part of an evaluation or planning course. It doesn't receive the attention due

to something so important, so potentially troublesome, and as utilitarian as it is. Because assessing needs is associated with evaluation, it is expected that instruction about it would be prominent in evaluation training programs. This is not the case (Engle & Altschuld, 2003/2004; Engle, Altschuld, & Kim, 2006). Surveys of the 29 programs identified in 2006 led to only one full needs assessment course, and it was offered by the first author of this book. In a prior study (Altschuld, Engle, Cullen, Kim, & Macce, 1994) only four relevant courses were found in 49 evaluation programs, and two of them were by the same author. Clearly, a training gap for needs assessment exists.

By extension, a gap in the practice of needs assessment (Figure 1.1) occurs (Altschuld & Witkin, 2000). It generally starts with the best of intentions only to dissipate, especially if it runs long. The effects of an assessment may be muted and below expectations because of inadequate planning, not understanding what is involved, and not integrating it into the deliberation and decision-making processes of the organization.

**Figure 1.1** The Gap in Needs Assessment Practice



Increasing deficiencies in practice as the needs assessment process moves toward organizational actions



Source: From *From Needs Assessment to Action: Transforming Needs Into Solution Strategies*, by J. W. Altschuld and B. Witkin, 2000, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. Used with permission.

With this perspective in mind, this KIT provides an applied understanding of needs assessment and a fairly complete set of procedures and tools for those who conduct the activity. It will be valuable for individuals versed in the topic and equally useful for others who are less familiar with it but who may be assigned to do this type of study in their workplace. The KIT is user friendly with hands-on strategies and examples imbedded in its five books, and at the same time it grounds the reader in the principles of assessing needs.

#### ❖ WHAT IS THE INTENT OF THIS BOOK?

This book contains basic concepts related to needs and needs assessment. It emphasizes a three-phase model for conducting an assessment. A number of methods are given in enough detail to implement them or get a good sense of their main features. The other handbooks contain more of the specifics of methods and processes.

#### ❖ WHAT IS NEED?

Informally, need implies a problem that should be attended to or resolved. Something is missing, wrong, or not working right, and action must be taken to deal with this troubling situation. A discrepancy is perceived—activities are not taking place in the way we think they should. Formally, need is the measurable gap between two conditions—“what is” (the current status or state) and “what should be” (the desired status or state). The two conditions must be measured and the discrepancy between them determined. Not doing so means that we have not directly identified a need. Inherent in needs is the idea that we must go beyond discrepancies to rectify factors causing needs. The simple definition becomes complex when probed.

First, *need* in grammatical usage is a noun, not a verb. If used as a verb, confusion will result. Consider the following:

“Students in the second grade need more time and drill in mathematics to achieve higher scores on their proficiency tests.”

This sentence looks like a need but isn’t one; it’s a solution strategy. It has a sense of a problem or need but not a measured discrepancy. The implied gap is that students are not achieving in math. But the need has

not been ascertained by comparing “what should be” and “what is,” and data regarding the conditions probably have not been collected.

Also recognize that there could be many solutions—improved teacher training, newer and better mathematics materials to facilitate student work, altered instructional approaches, and different content and curricula. Time and drill are one solution to a problem that has not been elucidated and examined in depth. We could implement any of the solutions, but the problem could relate to a different aspect of mathematics achievement, thus wasting valuable resources. The need and its cause(s) have not been fully clarified.

The distinction between solution and need is important, and it affects the needs assessment process. Groups tend to jump prematurely to solutions before identifying and prioritizing needs or delving into what underlies them. It is part of us as doers. We don’t want to be slowed down; rather we want to focus on solutions. Needs, not solutions, have to be the concern, and groups must be kept on target, thinking first about needs; otherwise poor or unfitting solutions could be implemented at considerable cost in time, energy, and fiscal resources. A task for the facilitator of a needs assessment is to keep a group focused as it gets started. (More about this is provided in Book 2 of the KIT and Chapter 3 of this one.)

A second concern about the definition is that often studies are mislabeled as needs assessments. In work done by Witkin (personal communication, 1994) and students in our classes, many such so-called investigations only deal with one of the two essential conditions. Perhaps 60%–70% of all articles are of this nature. They are ways for sensing problems or getting an idea of a direction for a program or project, but they are not needs assessments. Discrepancies have not been determined. (Despite this we strongly endorse the use of the literature for methods and examples of instruments.)

In some instances, need is inferred or sensed—“Tell us what you think is needed” (a solution approach)—instead of “Help us to delineate discrepancies targeted for action.” Needs sensing (Lewis, 2006) is cheaper, quicker, and easier to conduct, but at best it is only about implied gaps. While of value, it falls short of what we see as a needs assessment.

Third, in some situations the “what should be” condition is easy to state, and for others it is quite variable. Body temperature presents no particular difficulty for a “what should be” state—98.6 degrees Fahrenheit or thereabouts is an appropriate standard. For cholesterol, the “what should be” is below 200 for total cholesterol, and the ratio of total to high-density lipids should be less than 4.5. As cholesterol rises above 200 and the ratio exceeds 4.5, the risk of heart problems increases. Research has

established the “what should be.” Continuing in health, “Healthy People 2010” has specified evidence-based program outcomes for the United States such as increasing life expectancy and reducing the number of new cancer cases (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2005).

Other areas are not like this, with the “what should be” value-driven. What should be the outcomes of a high school education? Should graduates be familiar with a second language and have a certain level of proficiency in it as is desirable in Portugal, Belgium, and other countries? What should a high school student understand about science by the 12th grade? Even in health, what does it mean to be well, and what are expectations for wellness (physical conditioning, diet, mental health, upper body strength) for Americans (by age, gender, and ethnic group) or for another country (and strata within it)?

Going further, the “what should be” may be vague and lacking in clarity. Consider the social studies books used in many American schools. Some educators see them as watered down in content and language and mired in political correctness (Archibald, 2004). If this is accurate, what should the content be, how should it be chosen, who should have approval, how should sensitive historical events (slavery, the war in Vietnam, the Holocaust, My Lai, the sadness of Nanking) be portrayed, and at what level of difficulty should the books be written? Arriving at standards for language and the subtle dimensions of textbooks is tenuous given that many voices shape the debate and decisions regarding development and selection. Agreeing on “what should be” is more difficult than specifying a desirable level of cholesterol.

Another factor affecting the “what should be” condition is the wording of questions on needs assessment surveys. Is it “what ought to be,” “what ideally should be,” “what is likely to be,” “what is expected to be,” “what is feasible,” “what is minimally acceptable,” or “what might be the normative expectation”? These are scales from actual surveys and may not lead to the same results. Limited research has been done about which type works best with different groups and whether variations affect the outcomes of assessment studies.

Adding to the issue, is it appropriate to stress the “ideal” frame in questions? The argument is that we should strive for the ideal rather than for lesser outcomes. Would we have gone to the moon if we had aimed for figuratively lower objectives? Does it make sense to emphasize minimal competency for educational systems? If so, is that all we would attain and nothing more? Should that be the goal for educational and social programs? On the other hand, it may be better to not raise hopes and instead focus on what is achievable or likely or to use

several levels of the “what should be” on surveys to encourage respondents to think about multiple possibilities. How then should we structure items on needs assessment surveys? This is a perplexing conceptual and practical concern. The wording that we use on surveys reflects our values.

Choices have to be made, and different wordings probably lead to varied perceptions of need. We could wind up dealing not with true needs (“true” is an elusive idea) but with something referred to as wants or wishes. Needs assessors should be sensitive to how instrumentation impacts the process and interpretations of needs data. Unfortunately, there are few investigations about the design of surveys, how to frame items, and the length of time that survey results about needs remain viable (Hamann, 1997; Lee, 2005; Lee, Altschuld, & White, 2007b; Malsheimer & Germain, 2002).

#### ❖ EXAMPLES OF NEEDS

In Table 1.1, examples of needs (with one want) are provided. Two “what should be” states are shown, illustrating some of the considerations woven into needs assessment. Most of the entries relate to organizations that deliver services and products to individuals and groups.

Needs assessments are undertaken by organizations, hopefully with a focus on the needs of those they serve in order to improve services and products for their clientele. Needs here are collective, not those of individuals (Maslow, 1970). Because organizations carry out the process, don’t assume that a top-down approach is being advocated or that groups and individuals are seen as targets. The needs of the organization must pertain to those who receive its services or products. The needs of students, the unemployed, patients, and clients (Level 1 needs) should always govern organizational actions.

Needs assessments are done by schools; health agencies; the extension service; libraries; local, state, and federal agencies; municipal service providers; charities; and businesses. Mostly, organizations have the resources required—human, fiscal, administrative, and other support. (Because of this, sometimes assessments purportedly done for Level 1 are in reality those of Level 2, service providers.)

This means that the facilitator(s) of the process must intimately know the organization for which the assessment is being conducted. They must be familiar with its characteristics and how it goes about accomplishing day-to-day activities. They should get a feel for the under-the-surface and hidden nuances of procedures and policies. They should learn about how decisions are made, formal and informal

**Table 1.1** Examples of the “What Is,” “What Ideally Should Be,” and “What Is Likely” States

<i>Area</i>	<i>What Is</i>	<i>What Ideally Should Be</i>	<i>What Is Likely</i>
Health	30% of U.S. population is overweight	100% at or near a reasonable weight for age, height, gender, and body build	75% will reach the standard within a 5-year period
Mathematics	62.8% of district students achieve the state standard for the fourth-grade mathematics test	100% reach the standard or 75% reach the standard to remove the district from possible state sanctions	65% or more achieve the standard by this time next year
Reading	75% of eighth-grade students understand the instructions on an aspirin bottle or a package of patent medicine	100% should be able to do the task	85% are able to do the task 2 years from now after exposure to improved reading instruction
Youth Recreation	A community does not have a recreation center and adequate recreation activities for youth	A recreation center will be built and open 5 years from now Within 1 year a recreation program will be started in the community	The recreation center will be a reality 10 years from now A small recreation program will start in 2 years and slowly expand
Immunization	The inoculation rate for preschool children in a particular state is currently at 70%–75%	A rate of 90%–95% will be achieved, thus reducing the likelihood of the incidence (spread) of certain diseases	Rate of inoculation will slowly increase to 80% over a 5-year period Rate will remain the same without the causes of the problem being understood

(Continued)

Table 1.1 (Continued)

<i>Area</i>	<i>What Is</i>	<i>What Ideally Should Be</i>	<i>What Is Likely</i>
Wealth	An individual is currently worth \$1,000,000	With inflation and worries about job stability the individual would prefer to be at \$2,000,000 to feel more secure	\$1,500,000 would be likely in light of the general growth of investments within a 10-year period
Driving While Under the Influence	9% of all drivers during the period from 1 a.m. to 4 a.m. on weekend nights are above the legal limit for intoxication	Nearly 0% with rigorous law enforcement procedures, more sobriety checkpoints, and stiffer penalties	3%–4% even with the procedures specified in the previous column
Educational System	Current state standards for courses and areas required for a high school degree	Given changes in knowledge and the world of work, what standards should we develop for children now entering the educational system and who graduate in 13 years?	What are reasonable expectations for change in complex multidimensional systems like education?

influences, empowerment and support of staff, and what the overall demeanor feels like. To help the facilitator(s) in this overall task, the text periodically contains lists of questions for guiding the assessment.

Needs assessments have an impact on what organizations do and how they change. They may affect (possibly upset) power structures and the delicate balance that is critical for effectiveness. Needs assessors must go beyond the technical aspects of procedures, which, although important, are far from enough. A technically successful study of needs could be a failure if it does not become a part of the



organizational mindset and lead to improvement and action. (See Altschuld, 2004, for a more in-depth discussion of this point.) This is brought out in the situation described below (see Example 1.1).

### Example 1.1

#### **Failure to Assess the Organizational Climate for Needs Assessment**

An external team conducted a needs assessment for a nationwide consortium of businesses and an engineering department in a major university. It was partly supported by the state in which the university was located. The goal was to identify training needs and to recommend educational initiatives for the engineering field. The consortium was guided by an advisory council made up of member businesses.

A nationwide Delphi study (iterative surveys) was implemented with the involvement of engineers who initially were skeptical of this social science effort but in time became major and enthusiastic supporters of it. Toward the end of the project, the administration of the consortium changed with a dramatic and noticeable shift in direction, relegating the project to the back burner.

While the study produced excellent and meaningful results, the new administrators were polite but less than avid about following up on them. They conveyed their feelings to the advisory council, and things went nowhere. About 2 years later, the needs assessors learned that the consortium recognized that an opportunity to earn millions of dollars had been missed due to not heeding the results.

The assessment was a technical success but a real-world failure. What is the lesson to be learned from this experience? It is to be vigilant to the changing dimensions and tone in the consortium and to establish and maintain channels of communication. They are not automatically there, and it was incumbent on the needs assessors in this instance to re-create them. This action may not have saved the needs assessment, but this example demonstrates the importance of communication.

Returning to Table 1.1, “what ideally should be” and “what is likely” are depicted (but other possibilities for wording could be used). The needs assessor(s) and those involved in the process must be clear about this condition and what they are after when assessing needs.

There is variation in how expectations can be stated as in the last two columns for the Mathematics, Youth Recreation, and Immunization rows. There are different, value-laden “what should be” statements in

the cells. Thinking about this, responses to scaled survey questions could be quite disparate for constituent groups who come from unique perspectives and who could, in extreme cases, be diametrically opposed. Results depend on the subtlety of wording and interpretation by responding groups.

Other aspects of needs are included in the table. The Wealth entry satisfies the definition of need but is a want, not a need. Noting this distinction, Scriven and Roth (1978, 1990) modified the definition of need to help in separating the two. In their view, a rule to follow is a “reasonable person” stance for deciding whether a need does or does not exist. The reasonable person would say that while the discrepancy from \$1,000,000 to \$2,000,000 fits the definition of need, it is not one. It goes beyond a satisfactory state of financial security and is a want. Conversely, wealthy people could see it as a need from their vantage point. The relative nature of needs is obvious. Values are in play and have an impact on the majority of needs assessments and on the final selection and prioritization of needs.

#### ❖ TIME DIMENSIONS FOR NEEDS

The last row in the table is a long-term or future-oriented type of need. All needs are future oriented, but some are of a more short-term duration and others of a much longer term. There are no prescriptions that govern what is short- and long-term. Arbitrarily, “short-term” denotes a period of 3 years or less (emphasis on less) into the future with the implication that the needs could be resolved in that time frame. More than 3 years would be the longer term.

The time is noteworthy especially in education. School leaders (high-level administrators) in big-city school systems tend to have a limited tenure, perhaps 3–4 years, and may not be in the school district after that period. There is turnover of other staff during the same time span, and the membership of committees that look at needs and guide the assessment changes with a loss of institutional and committee history. Due to this, leaders and others may be reluctant or unwilling to attend to or deal with long-term needs. Why stake reputations on the long term when they might not be there to receive credit for problem resolution? It is difficult to make a commitment to the long term, putting one’s energy and spirit into it. Business may be like education with leaders feeling short-term pressure about the bottom line at the expense of the longer term, keeping in mind that the latter entails a lot of uncertainty, especially as we project into the future. The nearer-term mentality is prevalent despite the fact that some problems are complicated and seemingly

intractable. Think of drug addiction, poverty, road and infrastructure development, transportation concerns, alcoholism, smoking and its effects on health, maintenance and upgrading of electrical power systems, and our reliance on fossil fuels and foreign sources of them. In such instances the short-term fixes and term mentality are not appropriate.

Furthermore, it is difficult to maintain organizational memory in needs assessment studies, especially for long-term needs. It is for this reason that minutes of meetings, forms and data collection instruments, reports, recommendations for action and actions taken, and so on be saved for evaluation purposes and input into subsequent investigations of needs (see Example 1.2).

### Example 1.2

#### The Perils of Long-Term Needs

In an interesting article titled "The Future of Jobs: New Ones Arise, Wage Gap Widens," Wessel (2004) examined projections in areas expected to lose the most jobs between 1998 and 2000 made by the Bureau of Labor Statistics. When compared to the actual numbers lost, the projections had startling variability. In some cases the estimates were fairly accurate, whereas in others expected losses did not approach the magnitude of the actual ones (61,000 losses anticipated in word processors and typists vs. 503,000 jobs that disappeared; 89,000 losses anticipated in garment and sewing machine operators vs. 324,000 jobs that disappeared). At the same time 384,000 jobs were created for hand packers and packagers when it was anticipated 75,000 jobs would be gone.

Wessel (2004) pointed out the complexity and hazard of long-term projections in jobs and employment. Projective techniques are fraught with assumptions and prone to error. In terms of jobs they are subject to a rapidly changing workplace and economic conditions not only in the United States but throughout the world.

#### ❖ TOO MANY ISSUES

Too many issues have been raised, there's too much to deal with, and needs assessment seems to be a morass of values and issues. But understanding what may be involved helps in doing a better job of assessing needs. The issues point toward the careful consideration, purposeful decision making, and planning that must occur in assessment to make for outcomes of merit and worth to an organization. They alert you to what might or could occur.

Even small endeavors and certainly large ones necessitate pre-assessment activity before being started. Needs assessments can (but do not always) consume much time, money, and human investment. If not handled well, they can lead to acrimony over perspectives that at worst are on opposite ends of the spectrum within and across groups. They can exacerbate and accentuate differences instead of building on strengths and commonalities. They may be confrontational if not handled with a nurturing attitude. (Questions imbedded in many procedures will be helpful in uncovering conflicts and working with a needs assessment committee to resolve them.)

Assessments can drag on interminably. They can drain a creative group of its interest, willingness, *joie de vivre* (*esprit de corps*), and commitment. Fervor for change and improvement at the beginning can rapidly disappear. People, even those who are into the process, may get bored (the maturation source of invalidity from Campbell & Stanley, 1963) with the whole thing and “turn off,” leaving the endeavor to die slowly on the vine.

All of these things do happen. The needs assessor should be aware of what might go wrong and, by taking such into account, design and implement a better process, one more likely to lead to change. Snags can be avoided or reduced. A good assessment plan eases the path to quality results that will be utilized and appreciated by the organization.

#### ❖ WHY ARE NEEDS IMPORTANT?

Why should we care about this idea of need? To begin, Hansen (1991) found that assessing needs is a universal activity across health, engineering, education, and other fields. Sometimes the word *need* (with substitutes such as *problem*, *gap*, *deficiency*, *discrepancy*, *issue*, or *concern*) is not used, but procedures in diverse disciplines are, predicated on the discrepancy between “what is” and “what should be.” Needs are important because they make us consider risk factors in regard to them.

Needs are problems confronting organizations, groups, and societies (e.g., terrorism, economic competition via outsourcing, challenges to ways of life). In them are elements of risk, and once a need is identified it will be useful to analyze risks (negative consequences) that might be incurred by not attending or attending to it. Can they be tolerated? Needs assessment and risk assessment are highly interwoven, and ideally both should be assessed.

In epidemiology, risks are estimated and factored into decisions for prevention programs. Epidemiologists refer to prevalence—the current

number of individuals and/or animals having a disease (such as AIDS, influenza, the two forms of diabetes, SARS, chronic wasting disease in wild herds, or avian flu)—and the incidence—the number of individuals who will get the disease in the future. Prevalence and incidence are indicators of risk with the latter pointing to whether or not we are facing an epidemic. Prevalence and incidence are critical to deciding what should be done to keep populations healthy by lowering or stopping the rate of spread of diseases.

Reduction of risk is essential for the maintenance of health. Risk is used by insurance companies and government agencies. It is input for policies regarding the health of aging populations, the consumption of natural resources, and so forth. In these fields, it may be easier to estimate risk than in education, social programming, community infrastructure, criminology, and recreation. In recreation it is hard to portray what might be associated with decisions to add or not add recreational facilities and gyms in cities and neighborhoods. Would the crime rate decrease with more of these, or might it increase by providing a convenient location for some groups to meet? If facilities were not under consideration, how could the risks associated with not attending to the morale and psychological needs of citizens be determined?

What are the consequences of not all students achieving grade level in reading (or mathematics) when probably the majority of them will productively work and contribute to the economic well-being of a country or region? (So they don't do well on higher-level math concepts—does that materially affect the majority of jobs and work situations?) What is the risk of recidivism when convicted felons are paroled? To what degree will sex offenders and pedophiles revert to past behavior, and what kinds of follow-up services would be necessary to prevent this? Risks should be part of the criteria used when rating options for programmatic decisions when going from the assessment of need to actions for organizations. Along these lines, Altschuld and Witkin (2000) posited 10 types of risk in needs assessment divided into two categories (internal and external to the organization).

Let us return to the main question, "Is need important?" Given that there is risk in not meeting a need, it is—especially since needs guide so many of our collective activities.

#### ❖ WAYS TO CLASSIFY NEEDS

In Table 1.2, classes are given. (Other classifications are possible. As one illustration, Bradshaw, in 1972, posited categories such as normative

**Table 1.2** Types of Needs

<i>Type</i>	<i>Characteristics</i>	<i>Comments</i>
Present (Short-Term) Versus Future (Long-Term)	Some needs are short-term in nature (3 years or less with emphasis on less) Long-term needs will generally be over 3 years or more into the future	Groups will focus more easily on short-term needs (i.e., ones that they can see being resolved in lesser periods of time) Longer-term needs will be difficult to mobilize support for and to develop commitment of groups to their resolution
Severe Versus Slight	Some needs will be considered to be severe (larger in scope or of more consequence) Others will be of not so great scope and not represent as great an underlying problem	Severe or major problems will be more complex, will be harder to deal with and resolve, will take more time and resources for resolution, etc. As in the prior row, it will be easier to develop enthusiasm for solving slight needs
Maintenance/ Upgrade	Does not indicate a direct discrepancy at the current time but will become a need if a service, level of skill, etc., is not maintained or upgraded	All systems and skills need maintenance, which if neglected will lead to problems (discrepancies)
Collaborative	Needs assessments carried out by collaboration between two (bilateral) or more (multilateral) cooperating institutions or agencies	Organizations sense or feel that collaboratively (mutually) assessing needs and solving them have advantages for each involved agency and institution
Levels 1 (Recipients of Services), 2 (Deliverers of Services), and 3 (System Supporting Levels 1 and 2)	Level 1 deals with needs of those who receive services, Level 2 focuses on those who deliver services and what they require to do so, and Level 3 relates to overall needs (funds, facilities, etc.) of the system to support Level 2 and, in turn, Level 1	Many times are carried out at the second or third levels rather than at the first one Level 1 is to be stressed since it is the reason for the existence of Levels 2 and 3

*(Continued)*

Table 1.2 (Continued)

<i>Type</i>	<i>Characteristics</i>	<i>Comments</i>
Asset or Capacity Building	Approaching the issue not from a discrepancy point of view but from that of building and capitalizing upon assets and strengths rather than deficits or needs	Needs assessment always starts with needs or problems instead of strengths It is more positive to think about the strengths of the community and how to use them than to focus on needs (negatives)
Retrospective	Retrospective needs are assessed generally after a project or a program is underway and is at the point of undergoing a summative evaluation. If there has not been a prior needs assessment or if questions arise as to what or whose needs are being served, then the situation might call for a retrospective assessment of needs	In general, retrospective assessments of need are not often seen in the literature. An early citation is in the Program Evaluation Kit (1978) as suggested by Herman, Morris, and Fitz-Gibbon used in conjunction with the evaluation of a program This may be a catch-up mechanism when the need for a project was not established previously or an unanticipated or different Level 1 group than intended is utilizing project resources

needs, those where the “what should be” comes from research as in some facets of health care; felt needs, those that members of a group express they have; and others.)

When starting to work with an advisory group guiding the assessment, clarity as to type of need is helpful in establishing a common framework. Groups and individuals ascribe different meanings to the word, and time can be lost in handling disagreements. Being clear at the start makes the needs assessment flow smoothly and creates a more task-oriented environment. Therefore, it is recommended that the facilitator(s) explain critical terms and ideas.

The time frame for a need is important as is whether it is severe or slight. Attention and commitment to short-term, slight needs will usually be more obtainable than to long-term, severe ones, which take

more resources and effort to resolve with potential loss of interest over time. Contrast the need to upgrade basic skills in the use of spreadsheets to the training required to manipulate complex relational databases. The former is easier and less costly. The concern with long- versus short-term and severe versus slight needs was stressed by Witkin in 1984. She described a collaborative needs assessment, a table entry, conducted by four agencies (county government, local and county school systems, and a local municipality) for youth in an area. It was conducted by a committee of representatives from the four agencies with procedures tailored to fit various stakeholder groups. The representatives were the needs assessment committee (NAC)—a policy-making board for the assessment and a working one that may collect some of the data. The assessment was a classic with the use of multiple methods as advocated by many authors.

The needs assessment, although a methodological success, was nevertheless unsuccessful. Murphy's law took hold, and what could go wrong did, with the normal problems being multiplied by four. Learning, wisdom, and guidance come from failures. In Witkin's (1984) analysis of why things went wrong and what should be done in future assessments, she postulated a set of ideas pertinent to several rows in the table:

- Focus on short-term needs initially; otherwise long-term ones will reduce the commitment of NAC members and their organizations.
- Identify needs of high priority to all involved organizations (but not necessarily the top one for a single organization) that hopefully they can agree to.
- Focus on needs that can be quickly resolved (a partial outgrowth of the first idea).
- Make sure that there are ties to the informal and formal decision-making structures of the organizations.

She encouraged us to think about the distinctions between short- and long-term needs and severe and slight needs. In collaborative endeavors these contrasts are magnified in importance and will be critical for a positive outcome. The idea is that success breeds success and creates the foundation for further work in mutually resolving problems. By dealing with short-term problems, the good the collaborative can accomplish becomes evident, and the value in joining forces and



the empowerment to deal with more severe, long-term needs grow. Once short-term results are in hand, redirect attention to the longer-term, more severe needs. At any rate, it is wise to heed Witkin's (1984) observations arising from the crucible of experience.

Returning to the table, maintenance needs of mechanical systems, the human body and health, societal infrastructure, and educational systems are sometimes lost in the "needs assessment shuffle" but should not be. If not maintained, automobiles, airplanes, and computer and mechanical systems decay and eventually fail. Suppose computers or the Internet were to break down, be hacked into, or be attacked by a pernicious virus. What would happen to our daily lives if the systems were not maintained? How much of existence is controlled by or dependent on these means—would we be able to pay bills, invest, take a plane to see relatives (we probably would not even get off the ground), make a reservation, and so on? The situation would be intolerable.

Maintenance needs sometimes appear when a service is altered or changed such as when people retire and find that they no longer have certain aspects of previous medical coverage. In this situation the resources for coverage have to be reallocated from one's pocket whereas before they were from medical plans.

Associated with maintenance needs are upgrades of systems. Look at the blackout of 2003, which went from the eastern United States and Canada all the way into Ohio and left as many as 50,000,000 people without electric power, or Hurricane Ike in 2008. Was the equipment maintained and up-to-date? (One of the authors lives in an area with several major outages a year, probably due to an inadequate and outdated system despite protestations to the contrary by the electric company.)

The same rationale applies to the human body and health. We need to exercise although no immediate need may be apparent. The subtle effects of obesity, diet, and lack of exercise accumulate over time. When we stay in shape, better health is ensured as is fuller recovery from health problems that occur with the normal process of aging. Analogously, adherence to pharmaceutical regimens is also crucial. Further, consider the current and alarming rise in type 1 (childhood onset) and type II (adult onset) diabetes, and the need for health maintenance becomes prominent. The impact on the health care costs of not attending to maintenance needs for this single disease over 10 or 15 years will be extremely high. It will affect the health care costs of all of us (Chiasera, 2005), whether we are afflicted with it or not.

Maintenance needs may not be very appealing to deal with, put emphasis on, or make one's mark within an institution. We may not want to think about using limited resources for maintenance concerns; they seem mundane and elicit limited excitement and fervor, but neglecting them, especially over the long haul, can be perilous. The facilitator of the needs assessment must be attuned to the subtlety of such needs and if appropriate alert the NAC to what might happen if they are not given full attention.

The sixth row in Table 1.2 is a counterpoint to much of the previous discussion. Some perceive that in needs there is a sense of the negative, that the focus is on problems and what's wrong. In working with community needs that sense can be discouraging; it may sour things and not motivate individuals to action. Wouldn't it be more sensible to look at strengths and resources and how they can be expanded upon and mobilized? Community strengths reside in cultural, ecological, social, economic, and spiritual resources.

In assessments of the asset base, members of a community may be active in conceptualizing what is done and intimately involved in the data collection process. They may participate in decisions about what information is necessary based upon their knowledge of the environment. They would help in compiling lists of community assets, which are the linchpin for planning and activity. Even though decisions still have to be made about how to effectively deploy community resources, the starting point is radically different than it is in traditional needs assessment. Asset or capacity building is a legitimate concern. An assessment may be implemented so that it doesn't dwell on negatives and, if done in combination with a capacity stance, could be an excellent strategy for improvement. The idea of leveraging what is there could be easily incorporated into the overall process.

The last row in the table deals with a seeming self-contradiction—retrospective needs. If needs assessment occur at the start of an endeavor, why should there be a retrospective form of the endeavor? A retrospective one is different from periodically revisiting or reexamining needs. It is wise for organizations to routinely reconsider what they have done before and the needs they have previously uncovered. A retrospective needs assessment is a bit different. Suppose that in evaluating a project, a sense emerged that the original study had missed the mark or that groups targeted for services were not those who really benefited. This is exactly the case as described below (see Example 1.3).

**Example 1.3****Retrospective Needs Assessment**

A large suburban school district was worried about students who fall between the cracks, not achieving and fitting in with the majority of college-bound students in the district. Basing their decision upon perceptions of need without having fully investigated the problem, administrators convinced the school board to allocate district funds for after-school academic assistance for middle and high school students. Qualified substitute teachers were hired to staff the program, and it was advertised to teachers, students, and guidance counselors. Student usage numbers were substantial, but something was amiss.

When attendance was assessed from the program database, it was noted that lesser numbers of low-performing students were participating and much greater numbers of the B–, B, and B+ students were involved. A mini retrospective and informal needs assessment was conducted with the result being that the B type of students saw the program as a way to improve their qualifications whereas other students had given up, saw no way to really improve, or just had a relatively poor self-image (i.e., the program helped those for whom it was not intended).

Retrospective assessments are not often seen in the literature and usually are linked to outcome evaluations. They serve as a check on the nature of the need upon which an effort was based and whether the target population was the actual recipient of services.

Finally for Table 1.2, one other possible entry relates to technology and how rapidly technological change can create needs. The Sony Walkman is an exemplar. It was a clever invention with no apparent need or rationale behind it. It seemed like a fun thing to do (not that fun isn't purposeful), but what was it supposed to accomplish? Who would use it, and why would they do so? Now, the Walkman is ubiquitous (as are newer incarnations such as iPods). We see joggers and people who are exercising use it to listen to music, the news, and so forth. Painters and secretaries use it to alleviate the boredom and tedium of their job. Most of these individuals would probably indicate that it is a necessity. This demonstrates what might be called technology pull—the technology was produced and subsequent needs, which we did not know of or could not have ever imagined, appeared. The new technology created the need.

We could also envision a technological innovation pushing needs further than we had thought or understood at its inception. Word processing is a good case of this. Word processing software was developed to improve how manuscripts are generated. It forced one of us, a two-finger typist, to completely change his approach to writing. In other words, technology exposed needs that were only comprehended at a surface level and whose implications were partially sensed or understood. As we became more familiar with the technology, only then did it propel major change.

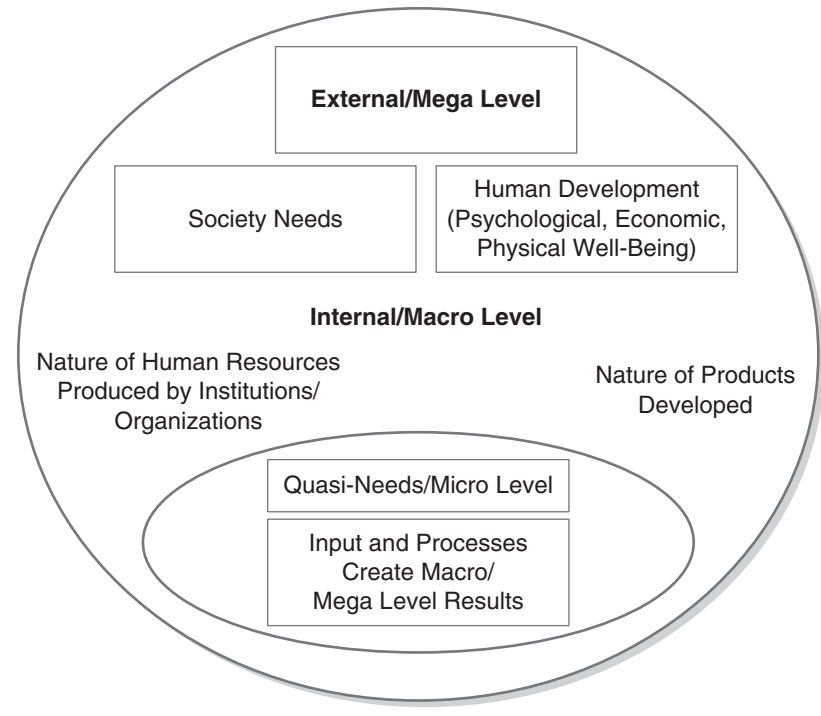
#### ❖ NEEDS ASSESSMENT: WHAT IS IT?

Needs assessment is the process of identifying needs, prioritizing them, making needs-based decisions, allocating resources, and implementing actions in organizations to resolve problems underlying important needs. When we identify and work on needs, decisions about how resources are allocated have to be made. Unless new resources can be located, ones already there (human, fiscal, material) will be reallocated from one part of the workplace to another. Biblically, somebody's ox will be gored if he or she cannot or will not shift his or her thinking to new, needs-based priorities. There may be losers and winners once the assessment is completed and action plans are implemented. Feathers may be ruffled, and rancor can result. Needs assessment is political, and by attending to politics throughout the process, the likelihood of success will increase. Communication and involvement within the organization have to be structured into the process of assessment. Everyone should be in the loop to ensure greater attention to the process and results.

Needs assessments may be conducted informally by small groups of people, but mostly they are organizational (businesses, community agencies, government institutions) endeavors. There are numerous models or approaches for assessing needs. The Organizational Elements Model (OEM) of Kaufman (1987) focuses on three basic levels of needs or discrepancies as shown in Figure 1.2. The model and elements within it are prominent in human performance technology, and the reader is directed to Altschuld and Lepicki (2009a, 2009b, in press); Clark (2005); McGriff (2003); Watkins and Wedman (2003); Wedman (2007); and the World Bank Institute (2007) Web site with which Watkins has been involved, which has an overview of models.

The external or Mega level represents the needs of society in terms of human development (psychological, economic, physical well-being, etc.). They must be assessed first, followed by the Macro level, which

Figure 1.2 Organizational Element Model



deals with the human resources produced or products generated by institutions and organizations as they relate to attaining Mega level results. For example, the Macro level focuses on how well individuals are being prepared to be productive contributors to society. Such considerations are critical for a country to survive and prosper in an ever-changing world. The Micro level looks at inputs and resources and the processes through which organizations produce Macro and, in turn, Mega level results. Earlier, Kaufman (1987) referred to these levels with the terms *external* (Mega), *internal* (Macro), and *quasi-needs* (Micro).

OEM is an action-based approach to dealing with needs. Along the Mega, Macro, and Micro continuum, discrepancies between "what should be" and "what is" statuses are determined. Besides the needs or gaps at each point, we should examine what is done right and, hence, what should not be changed. Strengths of the OEM lie in its systems orientation, its clarity in focusing the needs assessment process, and the substantive thinking underlying the three levels.

Another way of characterizing the assessment of needs was proposed by Cohen (1981). From the perspective of social agencies and services, it is divided into two categories, procedures for mobilizing support across stake-holding groups and procedures for resource allocation. For the first category, methods involving the participation of groups are required, and for the second, number-driven, statistical data and analysis of records and archived materials come into play. The two categories may also be used in tandem.

In 1984, Witkin developed a process model that contained three phases and emphasized three levels of need. The model and levels were revisited by Witkin and Altschuld (1995) and by Altschuld and Witkin (2000). Our revised version of the phases is as follows.

### **Phase I: Preassessment**

Phase I consists of getting organized and focusing on potential areas of concern, finding out what is *already known or available*, and making decisions on what is understood with respect to the foci. Phase I is a critical building block of needs assessment. Decisions could be to collect more in-depth information (Phase II), stop any further work because needs are not there, or go to Phase III—planning of strategies to resolve identified needs. Phase I activities lead to a wealth of information about the areas of concern with the possibility that nothing else will have to be collected. This phase mainly takes advantage of existing data.

### **Phase II: Assessment**

Phase II deals with collecting new information based on what hasn't been learned in Phase I. Activities also include determining initial priorities of needs and causally analyzing them as relevant to possible solution strategies. Phase II may require an extensive investment of time, personnel, and resources for the collection of new data.

### **Phase III: Postassessment**

Designing and implementing solutions for high-priority needs and evaluating the results of the solution(s) and the needs assessment process constitute Phase III. Evaluation of the process generally is not done but should be as part of organizational development and change.

Intertwined throughout the phases are three levels of need. Level 1 is the direct recipients of services, Level 2 represents the needs of service

providers, and Level 3 is of the system that supports service providers and service recipients. The needs of Level 1 should always be prime in the needs assessment process. Levels 2 and 3 are there to serve Level 1, the individuals who benefit from services, programs, and/or products. The needs associated with Levels 2 and 3 should rarely be placed ahead of those of Level 1. A closer look at the three levels follows:

*Level 1 (the primary level)* consists of students, clients, patients, customers, and so on who receive services or products to resolve their needs.

*Level 2 (the secondary level)* is the individuals or groups who deliver services and products to Level 1 (sometimes Level 2 denotes a treatment provided to a Level 1 group). Teachers, social workers, counselors, health care personnel, librarians, sales personnel, trainers, and others make up this level.

*Level 3 (the tertiary level)* is different from Levels 1 and 2 with a focus on resources and the supportive structure that enable Level 2 to provide services. It includes buildings, facilities, classrooms, transportation systems, salaries and benefits, and the like.

Many times information about all levels is available and accessible from organizational sources (databases, files) waiting to be harvested. Much information about Level 1, service recipients, may be within the system as for students in public schools, patients in hospitals, and inmates. In some cases, members of Level 1 are not within system boundaries (e.g., in mental health where many of those in need of counseling are not receiving assistance, may not be aware of or understand that they have needs, or may not want/value help).

Since needs assessments are often conducted by Level 2 personnel, it is no great surprise that many stress, overtly or implicitly, the concerns of Levels 2 and 3 over those of Level 1, with lip service given to the latter. But remember that organizations, agencies, and businesses are there to resolve the needs of Level 1. This rationale for organizational existence may be obscured by our Level 2 and 3 foci, the press of day-to-day work, and the problems confronting us. We lose sight of this goal sometimes because certain types of data are available (and cheaper) and thus Level 1 needs aren't assessed. They may require more effort, patience, energy, and dollars. The emphasis almost imperceptibly shifts to the needs of Level 2 or Level 3 rather than Level 1. It's easy for this to happen. Consider Example 1.4.

**Example 1.4****Level 2 Before Level 1!**

A mental health agency in a large city decided to collect data about the mental health problems of people living in the community it served. Survey results obtained and prioritized indicated numerous concerns that would be amenable to family counseling (marital issues, child/parent conflicts, employment concerns and job anxieties since unemployment was growing in the area). These were identified as important, priority needs by the agency counseling staff. The counselors who had been involved in the needs assessment were basically family oriented with their training and experience in that area.

What they missed was that the population in their jurisdiction was rapidly aging, and there were many hidden issues (alcoholism, loneliness, inability to attend to daily concerns, misuse of drugs, substance abuse, fear of aging, economic distress based on fixed incomes, boredom, loss of independence) related to age. Would these problems have been perceived differently if the counselors had greater exposure to and interest in issues associated with aging? Would and should different priorities have been stressed? Had Level 2 needs and what Level 2 personnel could deliver ruled out a different interpretation of results?

As another illustration of misdirection of a need, examine Example 1.5. It shows how we should scrutinize results and ask how they fit with the organization providing service. Needs assessments are conducted by institutions, agencies, and businesses that have their own Level 1 groups; they must focus on them, not other ones. This point may be missed when resources to resolve needs are expended.

**Example 1.5****What Group Is Level 1?**

A not-for-profit organization devoted to the concerns of senior citizens observed that nationwide too few senior women were regularly receiving mammograms. The organization (which is partially funded by member dues) decided to support a countrywide campaign to increase the rate of screenings by providing resources for the endeavor.

While the national need was there, a question arose as to whether or not it was the need of the Level 1 women who belonged to the organization.



The goal was noble, so why should there be any concern? But the purpose of the organization was to serve its dues-paying members. When this issue was explored (a kind of retrospective needs assessment), it was noted that the women in the organization were more affluent than the overall population and were regularly having mammograms. Obviously, the organization supported a program for a different Level 1 group from its members.

It is possible, when a great deal is understood about Level 1, to treat Level 2 as a pseudo Level 1 group. If a lot is known about instructional strategies for improving reading achievement, Level 2 (the teachers) could be the Level 1 target group. The NAC should be specific as to whose needs are of concern and its choice of a particular level for the assessment.

Although terms differ in the three approaches to needs assessment described above, there is similarity across them, particularly the Kaufman (1987, 1992) and Witkin and Altschuld (1995; Altschuld & Witkin, 2000) models. The concept of discrepancy is paramount, the idea of having a clear focus for the process is apparent, and Level 1 needs are inherent in the Mega needs of Kaufman. Beyond that, numerous techniques for conducting assessments are imbedded in the writings of these authors. So the landscape is well established and accessible, but details about step-by-step procedures are less so.

The three-phase process of Witkin and Altschuld (1995) will be the structure underlying this KIT. In Chapter 2, it is expanded with activities per phase and then followed by chapters that look at each phase specifically. An updated glossary of needs assessment terms, a format for reporting results, and an expanded list of references are included in this book.

### ❖ CAVEATS

There are things that this KIT will not do. First, not all needs assessment methods will be explained. Witkin and Altschuld (1995) sorted more than 20 methods into three main categories—archived (records, logs, social indicators, and other sources of data), communicative (interactive entities such as small- and large-group meetings and noninteractive ones like surveys and the mailed Delphi technique), and analytical (causal analysis, the determination of risks). Many of these are the subject of books, and information about others may be found through Web or quick literature searches. Given this, what we do is describe the main methods in sufficient depth for use and application. We tie them

into the needs assessment context and show how they have been adopted and tailored for it. References will also be given to other sources dealing with methods.

Second, the analysis of assessment data, if collected from multiple sources (administrators, Level 1 program recipients, service deliverers, stakeholders) by multiple or mixed methods (records, observations, interviews, questionnaires), is not an easy proposition. There are complexities in putting data together into a meaningful, coherent picture—reduction and interpretation may be difficult. Since the KIT cannot be all-inclusive about analyzing, collating, and portraying data, we concentrate on straightforward approaches for using methods and dealing with the jigsaw puzzle of needs data. There are utilitarian techniques and tricks of the trade for analyzing quantitative and qualitative data to define and prioritize discrepancies. Other insights into new and promising procedures will be provided.

Third, there is a difficulty that occurs in needs assessments when data are collected from multiple constituencies via different methods. (It is recommended that multiple methods and multiple groups routinely be used; see King & Jakuta, 2002.) Methods that might be implemented include in-person interviews with administrators; phone interviews with key informants (individuals representing groups who seem to know and understand issues); surveys with community members; examinations of records and databases; studies of social indicators; and so on. The results may totally agree (an ideal condition), may extensively agree, may partially agree, or may even be in total disagreement. The usage of multiple approaches to collecting data will be called *between methods*.

A *within-methods variation* is where different groups are exposed to subtle variations in an interview or a survey. It may not be possible to have the same wording and order of questions in surveys for highly varied constituencies. The phrasing for principals might not fit teachers. This was noted in a needs assessment conducted by Altschuld and others (1997) and by Lee et al. (2007a, 2007b). Could the ordering and subtle variations in questions produce results that cannot be compared and might affect the interpretation of results from groups? In some cases, this will add complexity to the needs assessment, especially in regard to needs-based decision making.

Fourth, where appropriate in the KIT, collaborative assessments across diverse organizations (in community services, health care delivery, and even business) will be suggested as a way to encourage cooperation for resolving problems. Yet it is recognized that each organization has its turf and characteristics and will tend to guard and control its space. We give practical advice for overcoming this barrier

while recognizing that such forces might prevent meaningful, mutually beneficial cooperation.

Lastly, when an organization engages in a needs assessment, it will be dealing with new ideas and directions or uncovering weaknesses in how it is coping with a changing environment. The endeavor should foster discussion and reflection and demands that ways of doing things be examined. It should be open with input from multiple levels in an organization and from the constituencies it serves. Needs assessment should not be a top-down, “controlled” entity, which could breed stagnation and fear of growing and changing on the part of organizational staff. Some may perceive that they cannot voice opinions and will not do so. They may feel threatened or that the workplace does not permit the expression of views (jobs could be in jeopardy). Fear might lead to acquiescence, not commitment. *Alienation* is the word that captures the point. Some may quietly leave the organization.

Many organizations could, by not considering changed directions, die on the vine. This happened where dynamic and creative individuals left a national center and seldom continued any affiliation with it. The control had turned them off! Yet needs assessments must have administrative and leadership support that is sincere and freely given and that might even affect how higher or superordinate levels go about their business. Needs assessment falls in between leadership, management, and engendering a productive and exciting workspace. The examples throughout the KIT come from experience in a variety of such settings and demonstrate how issues were dealt with (successfully and unsuccessfully). Use our insights and benefit from the mistakes we have made.

#### ❖ SOME NEEDS ASSESSMENT REFERENCES

The practice of needs assessment has been documented in books on theoretical aspects and ways to implement and conduct appropriate methods. In 1984, Witkin published a widely respected tome on the topic, notable for its extensive review and in-depth coverage of the literature. McKillip’s (1987) text followed with subsequent efforts from the 1990s to the present day. The reader is referred to well-known books of Altschuld and Witkin (2000); Gupta (1999); Gupta, Sleezer, and Russ-Eft (2007); Kaufman, Rojas, and Mayer (1993); Reviere, Berkowitz, Carter, and Ferguson (1996); Soriano (1995); Wedman (2007); and Witkin and Altschuld (1995). Further back are the writings of Kaufman (1972, 1988) and Warheit, Bell, and Schwab (1979). Numerous articles can be located on specific needs assessments.

### Highlights of the Chapter

You don't have to know all the concepts/ideas in this chapter. They are here to sensitize you to what needs assessment is and to enable you to do a better job of participating in or facilitating one. Here are some key points to remember as you move forward.

1. Individuals may not understand what needs are and what the needs assessment process entails, so some brief introduction about concepts is often required.
  2. Needs are measured discrepancies between what is and what should be.
  3. There is a *predisposition* to move to solution strategies before fully probing into needs—a tendency that has to be positively channeled.
  4. Needs and solutions can be confused depending on how they are worded.
  5. The “what should be” condition can be viewed in various ways (Tables 1.1 and 1.2).
  6. There may be risks in not meeting needs.
  7. Needs should be separated from wants.
  8. Keep in mind Level 1, 2, and 3 needs with Level 1 being foremost.
  9. Know the three phases of needs assessment and where the proposed effort is in terms of them.
  10. The scope of an assessment (large, small) and the general nature of the needs area should be determined early in the process.
  11. A collaborative needs assessment across organizations has high potential but may be difficult.
  12. Include relevant constituencies in guiding the process and in providing information about needs. (Needs assessments are not *done* to a target group.)
  13. Needs assessments are usually conducted by organizations as related to organizational change, development, and use of resources. They can be positive and political in nature.
  14. Leadership support (not control) is important for a successful assessment study.
  15. Needs assessment should lead to implementation of an action plan to resolve needs.
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