

Conducting the Needs Assessment #6: Phase 2—Assessment¹

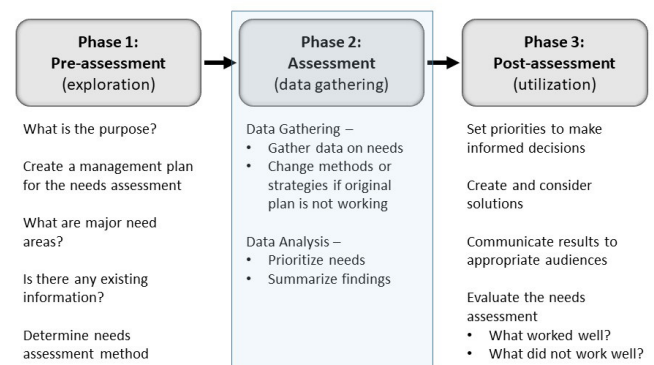
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Introduction to the Assessment Phase of the Needs Assessment

This is the sixth publication in the *Conducting the Needs Assessment* series. The assessment phase puts the pre-assessment's management plan into action to determine the needs of your community. In this phase, educators compare the “what is” of the issues to the vision of “what should be” to understand the magnitude of the needs and their causes (Witkin & Altschuld, 1995). Extension educators and other service providers can use the information in this fact sheet to help them manage their needs assessment project. For a complete list of the publications in this series, refer to the overview of the *Conducting the Needs Assessment* series in Appendix A.

What is the Assessment Phase?

The purpose of the assessment phase is to record the “what is,” or the current issues, and compare them to the “what should be”; this comparison determines the extent of communal needs and their causes. “The major output is a set of need statements in tentative order of priority, based on criticality of the need, and their causes” (Witkin & Altschuld, 1995, p. 40). The overarching focus of this needs assessment phase is on the data—both on gathering the information as well as on analyzing it and prioritizing needs.



Data Gathering

Data gathering is the process of collecting information on the specific needs and issues of your target group. When conducting the needs assessment, providers often find it difficult to sift through and differentiate between opinions and facts. The needs assessor must be able to make this differentiation, understanding that both are important. Although opinions are not based on facts, they provide insight to the way a specific audience may perceive a particular situation or problem. Both types of data can be useful in determining the “what is” and “what should be”.

Witkin and Altschuld (1995) suggested breaking down data gathering of the assessment phase into four distinct parts: (a) gather data on need areas to be assessed, (b)

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specify desired target or end state of needs assessment, (c) determine current status of need areas, and (d) determine any discrepancies.

Gather Data on Need Areas

Before gathering data, you must first ensure that you have your specific target group, setting the boundaries of the needs assessment. During Phase 2, you will refine a more precise focus and scope for data collection (Witkin & Altschuld, 1995).

For example, consider a 4-H agent who wants to assess what needs K-12 educators might have for school enrichment programs. K-12 educators, the agent finds, have many needs, and the agent cannot provide for them all. In this case, to be more effective, the 4-H agent can modify their approach by assessing only the challenges K-2 educators face while teaching life cycles in their classrooms. Doing so would narrow the scope (topic area) and target group (K-2) for assessment.

The needs assessor gathers data through three primary source types: (a) archival, (b) communication processes, and (c) analytic processes (see Table 1). Data sources are various ways data on a particular audience and its needs and causes can be retrieved.

Archival information refers to data that has already been gathered such as the sources listed in the pre-assessment phase (e.g., demographic data, census data, organizational records, or program evaluation reports). Archival data are most useful as indicators of the possibility of further exploration than they are as individual facts. This data helps to determine the “what is” factors of the specific target group regarding a need area. During the pre-assessment phase, educators/agents identify the major needs areas and possible archival data sources; that information is synthesized in the assessment phase. Some specific examples of Extension archival data sources are annual ROA/POWs, priority workgroup plans of action, and advisory committee meeting minutes.

Communication processes, a type of data gathering, receive information directly from people rather than from records. Communication processes are used to gather information and opinions on issues/need areas (Witkin & Altschuld, 1995); respondents may be surveyed, interviewed, or placed into focus groups for the nominal group technique. (Appendix A provides resources for these methods.) Communication processes provide the perceptions, values, observations, and levels of need of the specific target group.

The last category of data source included is that of analytic processes. This type of data source combines data gathering with analysis. “Analytic processes are used to identify and analyze factors that may have contributed to the presence of the need or that have prevented it from being resolved in the past” (Witkin & Altschuld, 1995, p. 49). Some examples of these methods are fishboning, success mapping, task analysis, and cross-impact analysis. More information on causal analysis techniques can be found in [“Conducting the Needs Assessment #11: Causal Analysis Techniques.”](#)

Specify Desired Target or End State of Needs Assessment

After gathering the needs assessment data, the individual or group conducting the assessment determines the “what should be” or desired end goal. Consider asking these questions to determine the desired outcome:

- What is the ultimate outcome I would like to see with my target group?
- How does this align with my long-term objectives?
- How does this fit into my logic model for my program-related to this issue?

Statements of the desired goal(s) should be clear enough so that, following the implementation of a need-meeting program, agents can evaluate the degree to which the target group reaches its desired outcome.

Determine Current Status of Need Areas

Some of the information determining the current status of the need area may have been gathered during the pre-assessment phase. Recall that, in the pre-assessment phase, the major areas of need were identified; and preexisting information related to the needs of your community were explored. It is important to utilize this information and the management plan set in place in the pre-assessment phase to transition into the action plan. The assessment phase allows for more detailed and focused information to be gathered on the target group and their needs.

Using the data collected, an approach to conducting the needs assessment can be identified. If you do not feel that enough information on a certain need area or topic has been identified at this step, look at the types of data sources you have at this point. Ask yourself questions such as:

- Do I feel that I have a complete picture of the need area?
- What other types of data sources are available?

- Should I conduct different quantitative or qualitative approaches to further explore the needs areas?

Determine Discrepancies

During this step, data has been gathered; a specific, desired outcome or goal has been identified; and the current state of the need has been determined. At this point, the issues can be identified and utilized to move into the data analysis phase. You may discover some discrepancies in your data. When conducting a needs assessment, a discrepancy can occur if there are competing goals or competing needs, and the discrepancy surfaces because the needs assessor cannot determine which should garner priority. If you have discrepancy data for concerns related to different goals, do not compare them across goals. Compare only discrepancies for concerns of the same goal. For example, a 4-H agent has identified four need areas of K-12 educators who manage school gardens. The discrepancies should be compared *within* each need area, not compared across all four need areas. If there are two observed discrepancies within a need area that are of equal magnitude, look at their values on the “what should be” part of the scale. The discrepancy with the higher “what should be” value is of greater importance.

Data Analysis

Data analysis within a needs assessment may reveal differences in the magnitude of needs that are practical in nature and not just statistically significant (Witkin & Altschuld, 1995). This publication, so far, has discussed how to collect data through various types of data sources, determine the desired target or end state, identify the current status of need, and establish issues. There are four important steps within the data analysis stage of the assessment process: (1) prioritizing needs; (2) performing a causal analysis; (3) synthesizing all data, identifying causal factors, and summarizing findings; and, if the original plan is not working, (4) changing methods or strategies.

Data Analysis Step 1: Prioritize Needs

The priorities set in the assessment phase are the foundation for the steps developed in Phase 3: Post Assessment, which can be achieved in two steps; in the first, agents rank general goals or concerns in order of importance. In the second, they analyze each goal area and the needs or concerns within each goal area. It is important to consider not only the target group’s current needs but its potential future needs.

Data Analysis Step 2: Perform a Causal Analysis or Fishbone to Understand Root Causes of the Identified Problems/Needs

During this step, consider why the needs have occurred or persisted and determine the general and specific causes of the high-priority needs. Causal analyses and fishboning are techniques that describe or analyze the factors that contribute to the existence or persistence of a need or issue. (See Figure 2 for a fishbone example.) Some questions to consider are:

- What are the characteristics of the target population? (Consider personal, demographic, and other factors that might have contributed to the need in individuals and groups.)
- What characteristics of service providers might be contributing to the existence or maintenance of that need?
- What inadequate system resources are causal factors?

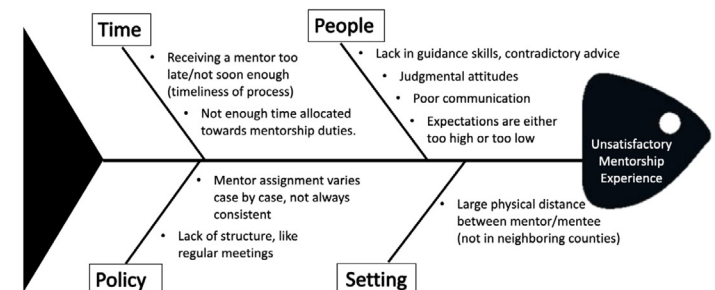


Figure 2. Example of a fishbone.
Credits: Karlibeth Leitheiser, UF/IFAS

Caution should be exercised when performing a causal analysis. This method is not a reason to place blame on individuals, policies, or programs that have not worked in the past but a way to better understand needs and issues. More information on performing causal analysis can be found in Conducting the Needs Assessment #11.

Data Analysis Step 3: Synthesize Data, Identify Causal Factors, and Summarize Findings

It is important to synthesize the data and causal factors to provide a sound basis for determining priorities of need and the criteria for future action. Analysis of the data from each source should be done individually to identify the types and magnitude of discrepancies between the “what is” and “what should be.” Next, combine the results from the different sources to give a holistic picture of the issues and their magnitude. When working with others, ask your team to help you identify factors or issues that need to be

addressed; then present these findings to the appropriate audience.

Data Analysis Step 4: Change Methods or Strategies if Original Plan is not Working

If you find that the needs assessment did not answer your questions or identify the need areas, you may need to change your methods and/or strategies. This is a good time to go back to the questions asked during the pre-assessment phase. What was the original purpose of the needs assessment? Did the information gathered and analyzed identify the “what is,” “what should be,” and what issues and needs are in the “gap”? Did the methods produce a holistic picture of the current state and provide insight into the issues?

Summary

This sixth publication in the *Conducting the Needs Assessment* series focused on the assessment phase of conducting a needs assessment. The assessment phase puts the management plan from the pre-assessment into action to determine the needs of your community. The assessment phase thus compares the “what is” of the issues to the vision of the “what should be” to help agents understand the magnitude of the needs and their causes (Witkin & Altschuld, 1995). For a brief overview of each publication in the series, see Appendix A.

References

Witkin, B. R., & Altschuld, J. W. (1995). Planning and conducting needs assessments: A practical guide. Sage.

Appendix A: Conducting the Needs Assessment Series Overview

Conducting the Needs Assessment #1: Introduction

General summary of needs assessments, including what a needs assessment is, the different phases, and tools to conduct a needs assessment.

Conducting the Needs Assessment #2: Using Needs Assessments in Extension Programming

Overview of using needs assessments as part of the Extension program planning process.

Conducting the Needs Assessment #3: Motivations, Barriers, and Objections

Information about the motivations, barriers, and objections to conducting needs assessments for Extension professionals and service providers.

Conducting the Needs Assessment #4: Audience Motivations, Barriers, and Objections

Information about the motivations, barriers, and objections that clientele and communities may have for participating or buying-in to a needs assessment.

Conducting the Needs Assessment #5: Phase 1—Pre-assessment

Introduction to the Pre-assessment phase of conducting a needs assessment, including defining the purpose, management, identifying existing information, and determining the appropriate methods.

Conducting the Needs Assessment #6: Phase 2—Assessment

Introduction to the Assessment phase of conducting a needs assessment, including gathering and analyzing all data.

Conducting the Needs Assessment #7: Phase 3—Post-assessment

Introduction to the Post-assessment phase of conducting a needs assessment, including setting priorities, considering solutions, communicating results, and evaluating the needs assessment.

Conducting the Needs Assessment #8: The Borich Model

Overview of using the Borich Model to conduct a needs assessment.

Conducting the Needs Assessment #9: The Nominal Group Technique

Overview of using the Nominal Group Technique to conduct a needs assessment.

Conducting the Needs Assessment #10: The Delphi Technique

Overview of using the Delphi Technique to conduct a needs assessment.

Conducting the Needs Assessment #11: The Causal Analysis Technique

Overview of using the Causal Analysis Technique to conduct a needs assessment.

Table 1. An overview of data-gathering methods for the assessment phase (adapted from Witkin & Altschuld, 1995, p. 48, Table 3.1).

Data Source	Description	Information Produced
Archival	Existing data usually found in records of organizations, agencies, or government	Data that helps determine the “what is” factors of a target group regarding a need area. This data may also provide information on causal or contributing factors of needs
Communication Processes	These techniques perform various modes of data collecting directly from individuals.	Mainly qualitative data consisting of the values, perceptions, opinions, observations of groups or individuals with regards to a needs area.
Analytic Processes	These use various kinds of group processes to examine archival or other data, apply analytic techniques, and produce graphic displays for decision making in various stages of the needs assessment	Casual and contributing factors and possible consequences if a need is not met. This data can be combined with other information to set priorities for action planning.