

Effective Needs Assessment Framework

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Project Summary

A Needs Assessment is a process for determining and addressing needs, or "gaps" between current conditions and desired conditions, often used for improvement in individuals, organizations, or communities.

This project is intended to provide a framework that agencies across the State of Ohio can use to develop and conduct their own needs assessments.

In addition, the framework will be used to develop a tailored procedural manual for the Ohio EPA's 2012 Clean Watersheds Needs Survey.

- Create a blueprint for developing and conducting needs assessments
- Tailor the above blueprint to be used for the Ohio EPA's 2012 Clean Watershed Needs Survey.

Project Goal

The intent of this document is to provide the State of Ohio's executive agencies with a basic framework with which a needs assessment survey can be created and conducted. The document also provides a plan by which the data generated by the survey can be interpreted and reported. The publication of this report of findings represents the primary outcome associated with conducting a needs assessment survey.

Project Outcome

This document provides an outline of the eleven steps attributed to conducting a comprehensive needs assessment survey. It is important to note that this document is a framework only. Not all elements and steps detailed herein will apply to every needs assessment survey conducted by a state agency. Ultimately, every needs assessment survey must be tailored to meet the objective(s) of the individual agency.

Project Benefits

A Needs Assessment is a systematic evaluation of the way things are, why they are that way and the way they should be. These "things" are usually associated with organizational and/or individual performance. Needs assessments are essential to resource allocation and planning. An assessment plan is based on an agency's effort to draw information from a specific sample audience. This information is then used by the agency to create an action plan that helps their stakeholders receive desired services or meet specific needs. The information generated from the assessment data is also documented in reports for future use. Many agencies have only one survey that considers the needs of all the stakeholders and audiences in general terms. For state agencies with numerous or diverse functions and complex planning needs, additional surveys that address particular problems or the needs of specific stakeholders and audiences may be required.

Project Team

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Framework for an Effective Needs Assessment

I. Introduction/Executive Summary

A Needs Assessment is a systematic evaluation of the way things are, why they are that way and the way they should be. These "things" are usually associated with organizational and/or individual performance. Needs assessments are essential to resource allocation and planning. An assessment plan is based on an agency's effort to draw information from a specific sample audience. This information is then used by the agency to create an action plan that helps their stakeholders receive desired services or meet specific needs. The information generated from the assessment data is also documented in reports for future use. Many agencies have only one survey that considers the needs of all the stakeholders and audiences in general terms. For state agencies with numerous or diverse functions and complex planning needs, additional surveys that address particular problems or the needs of specific stakeholders and audiences may be required.

Since surveys are the foundation of resource allocation planning, having a survey that meets the institution's planning needs is critical.

- A survey must evaluate the policies, practices, and conditions in an institution that affect the resource allocation planning for all stakeholders and audiences.
- It must address the general state of the audience, what is needed to improve the state of the audience, and how to provide for the long-term planning needs of the audience.
- It must identify specific audience needs, recommend actions to meet those needs, and prioritize the recommended actions.

A needs assessment covers the entire scope of audience and stakeholder needs. Hazards to planning are identified, considering such factors as environment, economic conditions, regional needs, access to resources, and government policies and practices.

All this information ascertained within the context of a needs assessment should be recorded in a formal survey report. The report should be written in clear direct language and should be formatted in such a way that information can be easily located and extracted from it. The report is the tool you will use when drafting your planning strategy or allocation proposal; it must contain the information you need in plain language and in an easily accessible form.

If a needs assessment survey is conducted by internal staff, the planning and implementation teams should be familiar with basic project management processes. The primary advantage utilizing in-house staff and resources is the organization's initial familiarity with condition affecting stakeholders and audience.

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This document provides an outline of the eleven steps attributed to conducting a comprehensive needs assessment survey. It is important to note that this document is a framework only. Not all elements and steps detailed herein will apply to every needs assessment survey conducted by a state agency. Ultimately, every needs assessment survey must be tailored to meet the objective(s) of the individual agency.

II. The Process

Step One: Defining need and beneficiaries

The first step to establishing a framework for an effective needs assessment is defining the need that will be subject of the assessment and the beneficiaries of the assessment. This step is the basis of the needs assessment. It is absolutely crucial that the necessary time and effort be invested into the establishment of a framework so as to have a clear understanding of the need.

To effectively confirm the issues and audience associated with the needs assessment your organization should first consider the overall goals and objectives in synthesis. To do this you must establish the purpose of the needs assessment by stating the underlying consideration that initiated the project. Generally, this factor will fall into one of three categories, although these three categories are not all-encompassing or exclusive.

- ▶ Is the needs assessment being conducted to satisfy a legal requirement?
- ▶ Is the needs assessment being conducted to satisfy an organizational requirement or objective?
- ▶ Is the needs assessment being conducted to procure general knowledge?

In order to make this determination, there should be a general agreement within your organizational hierarchy that the issue and/or audience subject of the needs assessment must be addressed.

When executing this step, be sure to consider potential risks that can affect the overall outcome of the needs assessment.

- ▶ Are there stakeholders that may have been overlooked?
- ▶ Can the findings of this needs assessment result in unanticipated political consequences?
- ▶ Can this needs assessment produce a content error that will affect other processes or functions with your organization?
- ▶ Are you certain that organizational support exists to utilize the needs assessment's results?

Finally, it is also important to identify and distinguish between the two types of beneficiaries: the audience and the stakeholders. The audience is the group who will receive and respond to the needs assessment. Stakeholders include those who are affected by the needs assessment's results or have an underlying interest in the needs assessment.

Step Two: Establishing resources

The second step to establishing a framework for an effective needs assessment is identifying available and needed resources. Primarily, this includes human capital and physical resources.

Human Capital

Human capital represents both the planning team and the implementation team. While these two groups can be made up of the same individuals, different specialists may be used on each team to satisfy subject matter needs.

Your planning team is ultimately responsible for building the needs assessment. The implementation team is responsible for the executing the needs assessment. To create either an effective planning or implementation team it is important to build a team with members that can fill all necessary roles. This will allow a team leader to delineate roles and responsibilities associated with the project. If possible, the members of these teams should have a general knowledge in project management tools.

Often, members these teams are predetermined based upon existing organizational human capital. If the teams are not predetermined, it may helpful for the project leader to utilize an assessment tool to ensure that the team is well rounded and that all necessary roles are filled. Tools that may be useful are the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator or the DISC assessment.

All steps associated with the creation of a needs assessment should be conducted as part of a group effort. The planning team will ideally consist of members from different stakeholder groups, as well as individuals with expertise in the area of research. Good communication between planning team members is essential as this team must establish protocols and job duties. If stakeholders groups are represented on the planning team, it is a good idea to provide them with a draft of your assessment instrument for review prior to implementation. This will allow you to gather constructive feedback that will ensure your needs assessment is effective when implemented.

Physical Resources

Physical resources include, but are not limited to, the time, financial capital, subject matter expertise, historical data, technology, and organizational supplies that will be utilized by the

planning and implementation teams. It is critical that the project leader make an assessment of both existing and needed physical organizational resources prior to project implementation. This will allow the planning and implementation teams to execute their responsibilities efficiently and without preventable delay.

When executing this step, be sure to consider potential risks that can affect the overall outcome of the needs assessment.

- Are the planning and implementation teams capable of instilling organizational ownership in the needs assessment?
- Is there sufficient expertise within the team to create an effective needs assessment?
- Is there sufficient support within the organization for the needs assessment?
- Will the planning and implementation teams have access to the physical resources they need in order to work effectively?

Step Three: Identifying and characterizing stakeholders and audience

The third step to establishing a framework for an effective needs assessment is identifying and characterizing the stakeholders and audience of your needs assessment. Identifying your audience and stakeholders will allow you to create a needs assessment that sufficiently addresses each groups' needs. Characterizing your audience and stakeholders will also allow you to separate each group from the other, thus allowing the planning and implementation teams to deliver individualized outcomes.

When creating a needs assessment, stakeholders are often easily identifiable based upon their proximity to the project. Audience can often be confused with the stakeholder group(s). When designing the assessment tool, the planning team should focus on the audience as opposed to stakeholders.

Characterization of your audience is the most important element of this step. To effectively make this characterization, there are a number of factors to consider:

- The number of individuals within the sample size of the needs assessment;
- The skill and knowledge levels of the audience;
- The education level of the audience;
- The organizational niche(s) of the audience;
- The cultural characteristics and potential biases towards the training necessary to execute an effective needs assessment;
- Other attitudes and biases that may jeopardize the effectiveness of the needs assessment;
- The audience's ability to access or attend training associated with the needs assessment;
- The audience's ability to access the needs assessment's resources.

When executing this step, be sure to consider potential risks that can affect the overall outcome of the needs assessment.

- Assumptions can and often do backfire.
- Stereotypes often do not hold true.

Step Four: Defining success metrics

The fourth step to establishing a framework for an effective needs assessment is defining metrics by which you will determine the success of your needs assessment effort. Success metrics are uniquely quantified with each needs assessment.

Initially, the planning team should identify specific, quantifiable, and realistic goals for the needs assessment. It is helpful to consult historical data when making this determination. This will allow the planning team to ensure that the new data will confirm current views and estimates.

Inevitably, there will be some question as to whether or not the defined success metrics are realistic. In order to answer these questions, the planning team should determine the ability of the audience to effectively provide useful data when responding to the needs assessment. This is accomplished through three phases:

- Identifying optimum and actual levels of knowledge or skill;
- Identifying cause(s) of any perceived or actual lack of knowledge or skill;
- Devising a solution or series of solutions.

The planning team should also consider whether the success metric are shared by the audience of the needs assessment. It is important to couch success as a mutually inclusive metric for both your organization and the audience.

Next, the planning team should determine if the established success metrics are in fact measurable. If there is some question as to their measurability, the planning team should explore alternatives that will allow for the data to be quantified in a manner that is useful to all associated parties.

Finally, the planning team should consider whether the needs assessment will be considered a success if success metrics are not met. If the potential exists for the needs assessment to not be considered a success, the planning team must create a contingency plan that allows the collected data to be utilized while determining what additional data would be necessary for success.

When executing this step, be sure to consider potential risks that can affect the overall outcome of the needs assessment.

- Different team members or supporting organizations may have different priorities. This can lead to team members and stakeholders becoming disengaged from the process.
- Success may be measured in phases. Without completing all phases of a needs assessment, it may not be possible to express success levels.
- Ensure that your organization, audience, and all stakeholders are invested in the needs assessment on a level that will ensure long-term support for the project.

Step Five: Examination of historical information

The fifth step to establishing a framework for an effective needs assessment is procuring and examining historical information associated with prior needs assessments or similar initiatives. The possibility exists that there is not historical information associated with past assessments or initiatives of this nature. If this is the case, the planning team should examine outside historical information from projects or efforts similar to their needs assessment.

When reviewing historical information, it is important to gauge the audience and stakeholder response to that assessment. Consider what factors led to that assessment being seen as a success or failure.

A review of historical information can also include, but is not limited to, examining previous management plans, strategic plans, public records and associated articles. Surveys are often used to clarify or answer questions that surface during the review of historical information.

During the review of historical information, the planning team should consider whether their prospective audience has been surveyed in the past. They should also consider the types of information that will provide greater insight into the nature of the prospective audience.

When executing this step, be sure to consider potential risks that can affect the overall outcome of the needs assessment.

- The historical information you review may be outdated.
- Failure to properly review historical information can lead to wasting time and resources on something that has already been done.

Step Six: Define methodology

The sixth step to establishing a framework for an effective needs assessment is defining your needs assessment methodology.

This initial consideration associated with this step is a review of applicable methods associated with assessments. The planning team should determine the assessment method that will be most

useful in achieving their success metrics. For instance, the use of interviews and historical data as general methods is commonly accepted but tends to provide limited information. Surveys, on the other hand, are most commonly used assessment method and provide the widest range of information.

The planning team should next consider what criteria will be used to select between the different assessment methods. Each has characteristics that may be applicable to your planning team's objective of achieving success:

- The exclusive use of historical data allows for short turnaround time.
- The exclusive use of interviews requires the use of fewer subject matter experts. This also allows for collection of the most accurate information.
- The exclusive use of surveys is the best structure for gathering information that can be deemed statistically accurate.

Once a favored method is determined, the planning team should establish a format for information collection and data entry. When considering the information collection, first consider whether the assessment will be conducted using a paper or electronic format. This will likely dictate the format of the repository within which your data is entered.

Next, the planning team should establish a quality control protocol for the collection of information and data entry. This protocol should include standards for data entry, data analysis, deriving conclusions, and archiving the data. There should be a standard for what is considered to be an acceptable response. A response may not necessarily be considered acceptable if the information is not verifiable or lacks supporting documentation.

A sampling scheme for the assessment must now be determined. It is helpful to sample a larger audience that you believe you will need. Consider what is historically recommended when determining a sample size as well as the population size of your audience. The greatest threat to an effective needs assessment is that the results are inaccurate because of the sample size not being representative.

If utilizing an interview or survey method, the planning team must design an assessment form or interview questions. With either, there are certain factors that should be universally applied:

- Questions should be as short and simply worded as possible.
- Questions should be written in a manner that eliminates ambiguity, and be posed in a manner that will generate the responses that are useful to the needs assessment.
- Multiple choices and numerical responses allow for better statistical evaluation and conclusions.
- Identify any support documents that may be necessary for the audience to complete the survey.

- Include phone/email contact information and location of a “frequently asked questions” document on your agency’s website that will aid in the successful completion of the assessment.
- Seek feedback from sample group of stakeholders prior to distribution of assessment.

Finally, the planning team should design and pilot a collection instrument for the assessment. Data collection is an element that must be closely monitored. It should be standardized and allow ease of use for your audience. Bear in mind that quality data collection may require more time, money and other resources than other elements associated with the definition of the assessment methodology.

When executing this step, be sure to consider potential risks that can affect the overall outcome of the needs assessment.

- Instruments that are not well constructed will not gather the necessary data.
- The audience may not be receptive to the survey instrument.
- Surveys and interviews may be seen as intrusive by the audience.
- The less experience your planning team possesses, the more time you will spend designing and analyzing your methodology. If you are under a time restriction, this will allow for less time to concentrate on results.
- Failure to produce solid statistics may result in your data being deemed invalid for decision-making purposes.

Step Seven: Prepare implementation team

The seventh step to establishing a framework for an effective needs assessment is preparing your implementation team.

Upon determining the members of the implementation team, if different than the planning team, the project leader should clarify to team members the importance of and need for the needs assessment effort. The implementation team will then work to create support protocols for survey recipients.

When creating the support protocols for survey recipients, the implementation team should establish a series of factors:

- Determine how often survey recipients will be contacted to encourage their response to the survey.
- Establish a uniform means by which the survey recipients will be contacted (i.e. telephone, email).
- Establish a uniform standard to document those contacts. If necessary, establish a standard to determine if additional follow-up is required.

- Create a document that provides responses to anticipated questions from recipients, and update the document as additional questions arise.
- Determine and publicize a specific point of contact for each element of the survey that may require support.

The members of the implementation team should next establish protocols for communication with interested parties. This will require a review of all existing and potential stakeholders. Upon identification of all interested parties the implementation team should establish a mechanism that they can utilize to convey information to stakeholders and receive input from the same parties. When preparing the aforementioned “frequently asked questions” document, the implementation team should also take stakeholder issues into consideration.

Finally, the newly formed implementation team should review the existing protocol for information collection and data entry. This review should be conducted in a manner that stresses the need for quality control within these functions. It is imperative that the implementation team understand the information collection and data entry processes so that they can identify potential weaknesses that would compromise quality.

Step Eight: Conduct assessment

The eighth step to establishing a framework for an effective needs assessment is conducting the actual assessment. Conducting the assessment has four primary phases: announcement; distribution; support; and collection.

Announcement

The announcement phase consists of the notification of recipients that the assessment distribution is about to commence. There are multiple options for announcement. The implementation team should utilize as many options as possible while taking into consideration the technological and business limitations of their audience. Emails, website posts, standard mail, and trade show/conference displays are all possibilities.

The physical announcement should include four elements:

- **When:** The announcement should spell out the dates that the assessment will be distributed, conducted, and collected.
- **Why:** The announcement should address the functional purpose that the assessment will serve.
- **How:** The announcement should describe the process through which the assessment will be conducted.
- **Benefit:** The announcement should describe the benefit that the audience will receive based upon their participation.

Distribution

The distribution phase consists of the physical delivery of the assessment to the audience. The primary concern of the distribution phase is the medium of delivery. This can include, but is not limited to: electronic, verbal, and hard copy delivery.

The implementation team should also create a contingency plan for the failure of any delivery medium. This plan will address the timeline and alternative means of delivery in case of failure.

Support

While assessment support is a broad concept, there are four generally accepted and reliable vehicles for support.

- **Informational sessions** are highly recommended. These sessions can be conducted through live presentations, webinars, and phone conferences. Depending on the length of the assessment period, more than one such session can be conducted. This is also a convenient forum to incorporate stakeholder feedback.
- **Outreach messaging** is another helpful vehicle to offer support. This can include physical mailings, electronic mailings, and web postings. It is important to determine how much outreach is necessary. Too many messages of this nature can be confusing to the audience.
- **Phone and email support** offers an immediate means to maintain contact with the assessment audience. The benefit to this vehicle is the dedicated, centralized means through which the audience can contact the implementation team to deal with problems.
- An **FAQ page** within your organization's website is an efficient means through which to offer continually updated support to problems as they are discovered.

Collection

The collection phase consists of the physical gathering of assessment responses. The planning or implementation team will have already determined the optimum vehicle for intake. This will include a designated inbox or receptacle for responses as it is critical to keep assessment-related materials separate from day-to-day business documents. Access to the inbox or receptacle should be limited to those involved in the assessment effort.

Another important element to assessment collection is a simple screening to review the initial responses. This element is designed to screen responses for completeness, validity, supporting documents (if applicable), and any other case specific criteria.

Any inconsistencies that may affect the viability of the response should be returned to the submitting party for revision. The implementation team should design a protocol for handling and documenting such issues when they occur.

When responses are screened and deemed to have met all viability criteria, there should be an established repository for their storage.

Step Nine: Data acceptance

The ninth step to establishing a framework for an effective needs assessment is data acceptance in accordance with the previously identified data entry protocol.

There are four elements necessary to achieve data acceptance.

- Data entry: Executing the quality control protocol described in step 6.
- Data analysis: Accepting and interpreting the information based on established methodology.
- Derive conclusions: Using defined methodology and accepted data to formulate conclusions.
- Archive data: Implementing previously defined protocols for preserving the accepted data and conclusions for future use.

Data acceptance is a relatively straightforward step in this process because much of the expectations associated with its execution were established earlier in the assessment process.

Step Ten: Publish report of result

The tenth step to establishing a framework for an effective needs assessment is publishing a report of results.

This step represents the finalization of the assessment process in conjunction with the acceptance of assessment data. Within the published report it is important to address your initial goals and objectives in synthesis. In addition to detailing assessment results, the report should list any problems or errors encountered in the design and implementation of the assessment.

In publishing of the report, the implementation team should consider the means by which they intend to distribute this report. While electronic distribution allows for the greatest range of audience contact, the implementation team should be prepared to publish a limited number of paper copies to satisfy the inevitable requests for them.

The distribution team should also determine their target audience for report distribution. Aside from internal distribution, there is the possibility that external stakeholders and the assessment audience may desire copies of the report. If there is any possibility that your organization's

report will not be available for public review, it is important to disclose this fact as early as possible.

Step Eleven: Close project

The eleventh and final step to establishing a framework for an effective needs assessment is closing the project.

Closing a project consists of an overall review of the entire assessment process. It is important to review the process against the timeline initially set for the project. Discussions should be held to determine if the project was executed in a timeframe and manner consistent with the organization's initial expectations. These results should be documented for potential consideration during the planning of future needs assessments.

Finally, the planning and implementation teams should converge to discuss and document the lessons learned within the project lifecycle. It is helpful to incorporate stakeholder feedback into your organization's needs assessment documentation. This too can be used for review during consideration future for future needs assessments.

III. Appendices

Appendix A: Needs Assessment Checklist

Appendix B: Recommended Project Management Documents

- Schedule
- Risk Registry
- Communications Plan

IV. Bibliography/References

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