

Conducting the Needs Assessment #7: Phase 3 — Post-Assessment¹

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Introduction

This is the seventh publication in the *Conducting the Needs Assessment* series. The post-assessment phase, also known as the utilization phase, of conducting a needs assessment includes setting priorities to make informed decisions, creating and considering solutions, communicating results to appropriate audiences, and evaluating the needs assessment used. Extension professionals and service providers should complete the pre-assessment and assessment phases before making recommendations and considering solutions to resolve the identified needs.

What is the post-assessment phase?

The post-assessment phase (Figure 1) is designed to help the organization or need assessor create improvement plans from the needs assessment data. This crucial phase answers important questions, such as: What needs are the most critical? Why haven't these already been resolved? What are possible solutions and strategies for the problem? How can we choose the best solutions and strategies?

Decisions made during post-assessment should lead to important changes in the system, such as new organizational goals and priorities, new or revised programs, and potentially reversed course on previous practices. Witkin

and Altschuld explained that many organizations fail to use needs assessment results, and that “it is not uncommon for the final [needs assessment report] to languish on a shelf, with nothing concrete done to meet the needs that were discovered” (p. 75). Organizations can avoid this mistake by completing the four steps of the post-assessment phase: (a) setting priorities to make informed decisions, (b) creating and considering solutions, (c) communicating results, and (d) evaluating the needs assessment process.

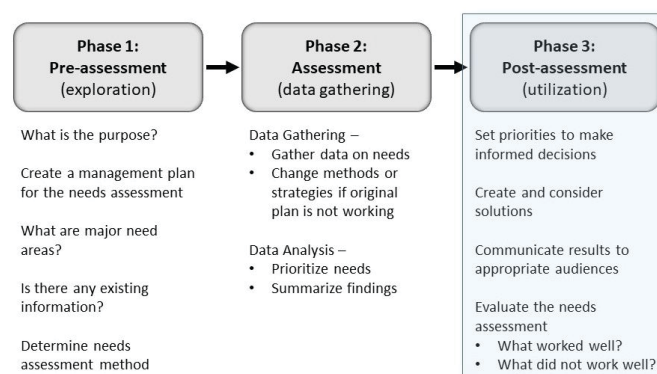


Figure 1. Three-phase plan for needs assessment. Credits: Adapted from Witkin & Altschuld (1995)

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Setting Priorities to Make Informed Decisions

Once the needs assessment is conducted, the organization or needs assessor should prioritize needs. Needs assessments often detect too many needs and may be beyond the organization's scope. This third needs assessment phase must prioritize the identified needs and determine "which ones merit immediate action and which should be part of a longer-term plan" (Witkin & Altschuld, 1995, p. 76). There are many factors (Witkin & Altschuld, 1995) that can influence how and what needs are prioritized, such as: (a) the magnitude of discrepancies between current and target states, (b) causes and contributing factors to those needs, (c) the degree of difficulty in addressing the needs, (d) risk assessment, (e) compounding effects, (f) the costs of implementing solutions, and (g) political and other factors. To limit bias, the organization's board of directors, advisory committee, or a group of key stakeholders can provide valuable insight into which prioritized needs should be the organization's top priorities to address.

Creating and Considering Solutions

Once need priorities are set, the organization can begin creating and considering solutions to mitigate need gaps. Solutions should be evaluated on three general criteria: feasibility, acceptability, and effect on the causes. The needs assessor should ask questions (Witkin & Altschuld, 1995) such as:

- Will the solution work?
- Will people who have the need accept it?
- Will service providers and managers accept it?
- Does it fit with societal goals as well as organizational goals and policies?
- What causes or contributing factors will the solution address?
- Are resources available for the solution requirements, and if not, can they be acquired?

The priority solutions table (Table 1) can help the organization and need assessor brainstorm possible solutions to the selected organizational priority needs. Use the following steps.

- Write the list of selected priority needs in the first column of the worksheet.

- Brainstorm possible solutions for each priority need. The worksheet provides space for three possible solutions, but more can be added.
- Discuss the potential advantages and disadvantages for each solution. Solutions can be added or crossed out based on discussions of what will work or not work for the organization.
- Select the top solution for each priority need.
- Brainstorm resources needed to enact the change.

Communicating Results to Appropriate Audiences

The organization's clientele, individuals involved in the needs assessment process, and the organization's board and key stakeholders should be informed of needs assessment activities, outcomes, and selected priority needs. Each group may require different types of information, so it may be necessary to create multiple communication memos, reports, and even social media posts to disseminate the needs assessment outcomes. The communication plan should include descriptions of the solutions, rationale, proposed timelines, human and physical resources required, and an estimated budget (Witkin & Altschuld, 1995).

Evaluating the Completed Needs Assessment Process

The final needs assessment activity is to conduct an internal evaluation of the needs assessment process. The evaluation is important as it completes the needs assessment process and provides insight into what worked well and what could be done differently. Organizations should conduct regular needs assessments; the evaluation can aid as a recall tool when ramping up the future needs assessment. The evaluation should include members of the needs assessment committee, needs assessment participants, and organizational stakeholders. Questions to consider when conducting the needs assessment process evaluation might include:

- What worked well?
- What did not work well?
- How well did the needs assessment meet its goals?
- What were the strengths of the needs assessment?
- What were the weaknesses of the needs assessment?
- What problems were encountered?
- If the system were to hold a similar needs assessment in the future, what changes in methods or other factors would be recommended?

Summary

This seventh publication in the *Conducting the Needs Assessment* series focused on the post-assessment phase of conducting a needs assessment, including setting priorities to make informed decisions, creating and considering solutions, communicating results to appropriate audiences, and evaluating the needs assessment used. Subsequent publications in this series will dive deeper into these topics to provide you the best practices and methods for conducting a usable and reliable needs assessment. For a brief overview of each publication in the series, see Appendix A.

Reference

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

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. Template for a priority solutions chart (adapted from Witkin & Altschuld, 1995).

Priority Need	Solution 1	Solution 2	Solution 3	Selected Solution	Resources Needed
1.					
2.					
3.					
4.					