

# NEEDS ASSESSMENT

		Level of Performance			
		Business Unit	Process	Work Group	Individual
Performance Change	Establish	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
	Improve	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>
	Maintain	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>
	Extinguish	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>

## Alternative Names

Gap analysis  
Problem identification

## Definition

*Needs assessment* is a tool for (1) identifying the gaps between current results and required results and (2) prioritizing the gaps according to the difference between the cost of closing them and that of ignoring them (Kaufman, 1998).

## Description

Performance improvement specialists and trainers sometimes disagree on what organizational needs should be addressed. At such times what is needed is a results-focused needs assessment process that identifies gaps between the current and desired results. The practical identification of needs (gaps between the current and desired states) is best done at three levels (Kaufman, 1998):

- Needs at the *mega* level, which are gaps in *societal* results
- Needs at the *macro* level, which are gaps in *organizational* results
- Needs at the *micro* level, which are gaps in *individual or small-group* results

A needs assessment uses two parallel processes: one that identifies the desired results through strategic planning and visioning and another that identifies the current status of results through the collection of hard and soft data. (Hard data are independently verifiable, whereas soft data are perception based and, therefore, not independently verifiable.) The two processes are interdependent, and both are essential to the pragmatic determination and prioritization of needs.

Many conventional needs assessment processes focus only on the methods for collecting data concerning the current situation. These processes often center on surveys that too often turn into wish lists concerning an intervention (for example, training), a process (for example, quality management), or resources (for example, computers and money). Other so-called needs assessments focus only on demands—what people want in terms of services or support—and not on the gaps in results being observed. But by defining the desired results at all three levels (mega or societal, macro or organizational, and micro or individual/small group) and collecting data at all three levels, an individual or organization can identify and prioritize gaps in results, thereby determining *needs*.

Figure 1 offers an introductory *map* (algorithm or flow diagram) that describes the major steps in conducting a needs assessment. The clouds in the figure contain additional topics and questions that should be addressed during each step of the process.

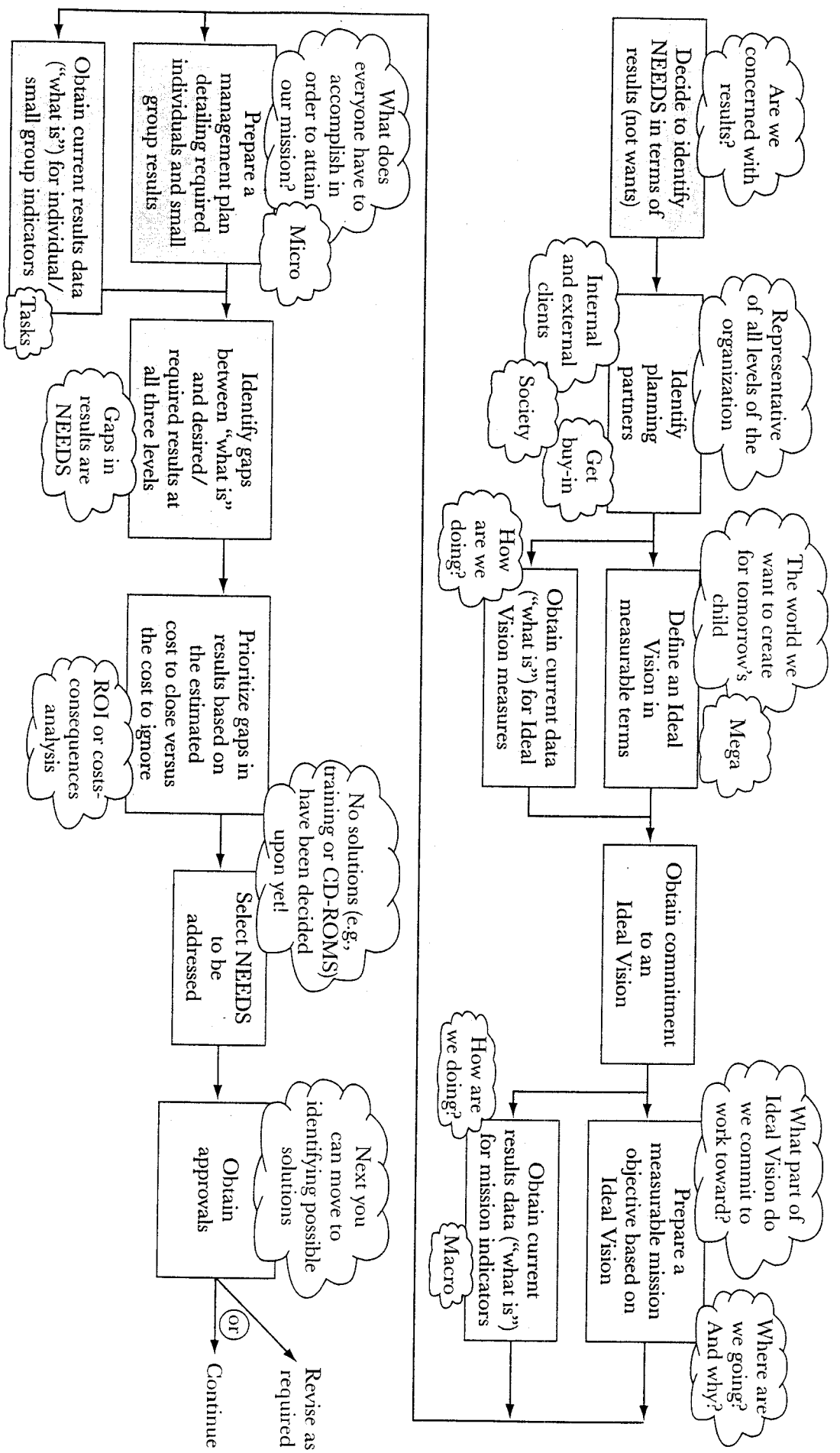
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## When to Use

Needs assessment is appropriate under the following circumstances:

- When you want to know the extent to which your performance is successful and the extent to which it is not
- When there is a perceived or actual performance problem and you want to identify possible ways to close the performance gap based on performance data
- When you must demonstrate that the cost of meeting needs is less than that of ignoring them (when you have to demonstrate return on investment for what you are now doing and delivering or for what you recommend doing and delivering)
- When you want to ensure that your organization—what it uses, does, produces, and delivers—will add value to the organization itself, to external clients, and to society

FIGURE 1. SCAN QUESTIONS.



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- When the organization is experiencing massive changes and wants to be responsive and responsible to both the current obvious realities and any underlying realities
- When employee morale or performance is low, according to hard or soft data
- When new equipment, new processes, or new procedures are to be implemented and you want to ensure that employees will be competent in performing the operations required
- When large numbers of new employees will be entering the organization and their competent performance is essential if the organization is to add value to the external world

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## Case Study

A needs assessment consultant (“Consultant”) was called by a representative of a very large technological organization (“Organization”). The conversation went something like this:

*Organization:* We have completed a needs assessment of our entire professional staff worldwide. We have had our employees list “actuals” and “optimals” in our annual two-page company survey. And we still can’t make any sense of our data.

*Consultant:* Let me guess—you sent out a questionnaire and asked people what they “needed.”

*Organization:* How did you know?

*Consultant:* Well, that’s where most conventional needs assessments start and end, with a long survey, or wish list, of favorite solutions.

*Organization:* Yes, that’s our company policy. Each year we ask our employees what they want or “need.” But isn’t that important for internal customer satisfaction?

*Consultant:* Yes and no. It’s good to know what results your employees envision themselves as achieving and what results they actually are achieving, but asking them to provide the solution often removes the opportunity for identifying and analyzing other possible solutions.

*Organization:* Hmm. Please continue.

*Consultant:* When you can’t make sense out of such data, it is almost always because the questions and responses were focused on means and resources—the things people often mistakenly say they “need” rather than the results that will be of value to internal and external clients. Even “actuals” and “optimals” frequently end up being spoken of in terms of means rather than ends. And without clear gaps in results,

you can't make sense of your data; you can't prioritize the data on the basis of how much it will cost to close the gaps versus how much it will cost to ignore those gaps.

*Organization:* That's exactly what we did . . . and how our people responded. How can we fix it?

*Consultant:* There are several easy steps in developing a needs assessment process that will ensure that your organization achieves success in terms of two bottom lines: financial (the conventional bottom line) and societal (the new paradigm of the bottom line). The first step is to develop the organizational context for the assessment, which requires that you bring together several organizational groups as planning partners: the strategic planning team, the quality people, the marketing group, and others that have traditionally functioned separately. Through this partnership your people can identify gaps between current and desired results at three levels: (1) the societal or mega level, (2) the organizational or macro level, and (3) the individual/small-group or micro level. The process of identifying gaps may require that the organization try viewing itself differently—from a societal perspective.

When gaps in results have been identified, they need to be prioritized based on the cost of closing the gaps versus the cost of ignoring the gaps (a rough estimate of return on investment). Only after gaps have been identified and prioritized are they analyzed—broken down into component parts and root causes. Then solutions can be selected. Waiting until this stage of the assessment to select solutions ensures that your organization is not applying solutions to “nonproblems.”

Unfortunately, the management of the organization did not want to spend any more money on another needs assessment, and today business continues as usual. A few training courses have been conducted; however, they are not working well because their objectives were not about ends and performance but rather about means and *knowing about*. Continuing cuts in funding are being felt each year. Although the organization's budgets have not fallen enough to threaten organizational failure, the organization is merely giving lip service to needs assessment without being committed to doing it well. The result is more than disappointing.

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## Resources and References

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## Intervention Authors

Roger Kaufman, Ph.D.  
Professor and Director  
Office for Needs Assessment and Planning  
Florida State University  
3500 University Center, Building C  
Tallahassee, FL 32306  
Phone: 850-644-6435  
E-mail: rkaufman@onap.fsu.edu

Ryan Watkins, Ph.D.  
Research Associate  
Office for Needs Assessment and Planning  
Florida State University  
3500 University Center, Building C  
Tallahassee, FL 32306  
Phone: 850-644-6435  
E-mail: rwatkins@onap.fsu.edu