Needs Assessments: Similarities and Differences

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Introduction

A needs assessment is a necessary element in the organization's desire for performance improvement, productivity, and customer satisfaction. There are different levels of needs assessments available, depending on the purpose and scope of determined objectives, criteria/requirements and organizational vision. The basic premise in conducting a needs assessment is the existence of a gap between what is and what should be. Kaufman and Guerra-Lopez (2013) indicate that a needs assessment identifies gaps between what is desired and the current state. It is important to note that a needs assessment does not identify the means necessary to close the gaps, but it does prioritize the gaps based on a comparison of the cost of closing the gaps or ignoring them.

The relevance of a needs assessment is directly related to the quality of the decisions made by those involved in the implementation of change and the improvement of the organization, its employees, and society. According to Watkins, Meiers, and Visser (2012), involvement in improvement efforts benefits the organization and changes lives. This can lead to increased job satisfaction, longer retention, improved quality of life, innovation and creativity, and numerous other benefits that can be experienced by clients, partners, and society.

Since there are different levels of results in an organization, there are different levels of assessments used to determine how an organization can align desired results with organizational, societal, and stakeholder needs. These levels of needs assessment include: Mega, Macro, Micro, Quasi, and Training. Selecting one of these assessments requires a comparison/contrast of the critical characteristics involved, which include the focus of the assessment, when to use it, how it works, who is involved, and key challenges.

Mega-Level Assessment

A Mega-level needs assessment provides the essential *front-end alignment* that ensures that everything the organization does to improve performance is linked, including inputs, processes, products, outputs, and outcomes. It is a process to identify and resolve gaps between desired and actual accomplishments and contributions of an organization, but the focus is to determine the usefulness and value of these accomplishments to the organization's external clients and society. The measurement of this value is a necessary element that is required for success. Accomplishments that might add value may relate to personal security, public health, safety, environmental awareness, and quality of life (Kaufman & Guerra-Lopez, 2013). Linking the resources and outputs of the organization ensures that the value of the organization to those outside of it is the primary directive of the organization and its employees.

Knowing when to use a Mega-level assessment should be the basis for any organizational improvement efforts. If the organization is facing a significant change, threat, or opportunity, if it wants to ensure long-term survival and profitability, or is engaged in strategic planning, then a Mega-level assessment should be completed. A review of the process for completing this level of assessment reveals the common steps involved at all levels, which include determining the gaps between the desired and current state, prioritizing the gaps, updating the items involved in the assessment, and making recommendations to close the gaps (Kaufman & Guerra-Lopez, 2013). The differences involved help to identify how the Mega-level assessment works.

The process begins with the identification of the ideal vision, which defines where the organization is headed and implies that it should produce products and services that provide value to its clients and to society. Determining the current status of the ideal vision involves the collection of data, which can include reports, documents, databases, and other sources not previously possible. The required data is also available from other parties within the organization, who may have collected it for different reasons. Using this secondary data can save time and money when working to complete the assessment. The next step is to determine the gap between the desired and the current state; this helps to ensure that the targets are achievable. As with the other assessments, the gaps are prioritized based on the costs and consequences of closing the gaps vs ignoring them. Another difference is clarified in the next step, which involves determining the mission and functional objectives of the organization (Kaufman & Guerra-Lopez, 2013). The process reverts to a common last step in all the assessments through the development of recommendations to close the gaps.

The success of a Mega-level assessment requires that representatives from all relevant stakeholder groups be involved in the process. A comprehensive and representative stakeholder group should be identified for revisions, feedback, and approval. A subset of this group should form a more active core work group that will collaborate closely with the needs assessors. All efforts are carried out as a needs assessment and planning team (Kaufman & Guerra-Lopez, 2013). As with any organizational initiative, involving both internal and external stakeholders can help to mitigate the challenges involved in a Mega-level assessment.

Involving stakeholders is commendable, but their acceptance of the assessment is not always possible. According to Kaufman and Guerra-Lopez (2013), current practices can often be hard to overcome. The business as usual paradigm is adhered to by stakeholders, who may not readily see the relevance of a Mega-level assessment. This makes follow-through an essential aspect that helps stakeholders realize the added value of the assessment to customers and society.

Macro-Level Assessment

A Macro-level needs assessment helps to identify and resolve the gaps between the desired and actual accomplishments of the organization, which are measured by organizational outputs, such as market share, revenue, sales, and profits. While Mega-level is concerned with the measurable benefits to society, the Macro-level is concerned with the benefits that the organization receives *from* society. Some examples of these benefits are profits, revenue, and market share. However, the two levels are not independent of each other, since the only way to reap these benefits from society is to assure that the organization contributes value to society (Kaufman & Guerra-Lopez, 2013). Linking the values to society with the values received from society helps to reinforce the importance of completing the Mega-level prior to the Macro-level assessment.

Knowing when to use a Macro-level assessment is important because it is also the basis for any organizational improvement efforts. If the goal of the organization is to ensure short-term profitability, or it is engaged in tactical planning, then a Macro-level assessment should be completed (Kaufman & Guerra-Lopez, 2013). This assessment also includes the common steps of determining the gaps between the desired and the current state, prioritizing these gaps, updating the items covered in the assessment, and making recommendations to close the gaps. The differences involved help to identify how the Macro-level assessment works.

Instead of the ideal vision, the process identifies the desired criteria/requirements that link the Mega, Macro, and Micro gaps. Macro objectives are developed, but they are not always stated in terms of results and can be somewhat vague. *Being the best at what we do* is a phrase that says nothing about what the organization wants to accomplish. A key element of the Macro-level is to find the meaning behind these types of phrases and then translate them into meaningful results. Unlike the Mega-level, which focuses on long-term, the Macro-level focuses on short-term (i.e. one-to-five-year range). The data that is collected is often available within the organization, but it is important to collect hard data, and not opinions collected through surveys. One difference in the Macro-level assessment is that instead of determining the mission and functional objectives at the end of the process, the requirements that link the Mega, Macro, and Micro assessments are either updated or new ones are created (Kaufman & Guerra-Lopez, 2013). This highlights the shift from the organization's vision to the requirements necessary to achieve the results necessary to realize that vision.

A Macro-level assessment also requires that representatives from all groups who could affect or be affected by the assessment be involved in it. Meetings with all needs assessment partners should be convened to help them collectively agree on what results and indicators would provide evidence that the organization is performing as expected (Kaufman & Guerra-Lopez, 2013). This collective agreement does not eliminate the challenges associated with the Macro-level assessment.

If the mission objectives are not results-oriented, then the lack of accountability can lead to much inefficiency. This can undermine the ability of the organization to link its accomplishments to the requirement of adding value to its clients and to society. Although partners are eager to get started, they are not always willing to document valid organizational needs and foci (Kaufman & Guerra-Lopez, 2013). This may also make it difficult to obtain the appropriate data for the assessment.

Micro-Level Assessment

The Micro-level assessment shifts the focus from the organization as a system to the individual, group, or department performance levels in the organization. The Mega-level focuses on the organizational vision, the Macro-level focuses on the criteria/requirements necessary to reach that vision, and the Micro-level focuses on the deliverables related to performance in the organization that helps meet the criteria/requirements. These deliverables are the building block objectives that help the organization reach its Macro results, which in turn, helps the organization deliver on its Mega contributions (Kaufman & Guerra-Lopez, 2013). These three assessments link the inputs and resources of the organization with the outputs and help to determine whether the actions taken are valuable to organizational effectiveness and whether they assist in contributing value to external customers and society.

Since the Micro-level focus is on operational effectiveness through improved performance, this assessment is used when the organization introduces changes that will impact job requirements and improve performance. It is also used when the organization is engaged in operational planning. The difference in this assessment is that instead of updating or creating requirements, this level updates or creates performance objectives. These performance objectives indicate the required performance and standards for an individual or a group of performers. Specific indicators are also developed to measure the results of the objectives. For example, if a performance objective indicates that sales staff will acquire at least 20 new accounts per quarter, the specific indicator is the number of new accounts per quarter (Kaufman & Guerra-Lopez, 2013).

Similarities in the process include the identification of criteria requirements, identifying the current status of these requirements, determining gaps between the current and desired state, prioritizing gaps based on costs and consequences of closing vs ignoring them, and determining recommendations to close these gaps (Kaufman & Guerra-Lopez, 2013).

The success of a Micro-level assessment requires that representatives from all relevant groups be involved in the process. This includes mid-level management, supervisors, employees, and customers affected by performance objectives. It is important that the needs assessment partners agree on what the desired performance objectives should and will be (Kaufman & Guerra-Lopez, 2013). This is not the only challenge involved in the process.

As with all levels of needs assessments, getting buy-in from all partners involved in the process is critical, but can be slow to achieve. Partners have other responsibilities that may take precedence, which could push the assessment farther down the list. Access to data can also be a challenge since it is being used to improve organizational performance. People fear that the data they provide could result in a negative reflection on themselves and their own performance. It is important that the assessor establish a trusting relationship with those who have access to the data necessary to complete the assessment (Kaufman & Guerra-Lopez, 2013). Although there are issues with collecting data during the Mega and Macro assessments, the performance improvement aspect of the Micro-level makes necessary data collection more challenging.

Quasi-Level Assessment

A Quasi needs assessment is used to identify gaps in methods and means, such as training or organizational development. This process looks at the gaps between what should be known and what is known by performers regarding a specific topic. Variations of a process improvement approach could also be considered a Quasi needs assessment because once the process goal and deliverable are identified and the idea process flow is outlined, the current process is also outlined, and gaps are identified for resolution. The Quasi needs assessment covers many front-end tasks associated with needs assessments, such as instructional, learner, and context analysis, which are often completed in the contexts of training needs assessments (Kaufman & Guerra-Lopez, 2013).

The diverse nature of a Quasi-level assessment covers more than training needs. According to Kaufman and Guerra-Lopez (2013), it can also be used to identify gaps in resources, such as the number of training facilities and the capabilities needed for them to perform the training function. It can also be used to identify the gaps between the specific tools that performers should have to complete their work and the tools they are currently using. A Quasi needs assessment helps ensure the efficiency of the support solutions and initiatives that are aligned through the Micro-level assessment, but ensuring effectiveness is still part of the Micro-level assessment.

A Quasi needs assessment is appropriate when the organization is experiencing challenges that are related to specific processes or resources, or if it is about to implement a new process or resource. Another reason to use it is if the organization is engaged in resource planning (Kaufman & Guerra-Lopez, 2013). This assessment seems to cover more areas than the Mega, Macro, and Micro-levels, but these three levels provide the foundation for the alignment of inputs, resources, and outputs as needed.

The process for this assessment is exactly like the Macro-level assessment. It begins with the identification of desired criteria/requirements that link Mega, Macro, and Micro gaps, identifies the current status of these requirements, determines the gaps between desired and current state, prioritizes gaps based on costs and consequences of closing vs ignoring them, updates or determines new requirements, and determines recommendations to close the gaps (Kaufman & Guerra-Lopez, 2013). The difference is that the Quasi needs assessment complements the Training needs assessment because it focuses on training and organizational development, which uses performance improvement to close gaps (through training). For example, if the desired criteria is that training covers a specific legislation, and the current training materials do not cover it, then there is a gap between the two. This type of gap currently exists at Lansing Community College, with the implementation of the accessibility initiative. The purpose of this initiative is to ensure that all students have access to all course materials, including those with disabilities. My work on this initiative will involve the update of all course materials to ensure student accessibility.

As with the other assessment levels, the Quasi needs assessment also requires the involvement of the relevant managers, supervisors, employees, customers, and anyone else who might be affected by the assessment. A team should be established to help review, provide feedback, approve, and directly participate in the technical aspects of the process. They can help collect data or at least help the assessor gain access to required data. Gaining formal input and consensus from partners regarding the objectives that are linked to the Mega, Macro, and Micro levels helps to ensure that accountability is in place for the success of the assessment (Kaufman & Guerra-Lopez, 2013).

Working with this team can help the assessor to mitigate some of the challenges associated with the Quasi needs assessment. According to Kaufman & Guerra-Lopez (2013), when improving organizational processes and inputs, the assumption is that this will ultimately add value to human and organizational performance. The best means of ensuring this is to conduct results-driven assessments (e.g. Mega, Macro, and Micro). Another challenge is to get team members to accept alternatives that go beyond the scope of what they want to fix. This is often more difficult if they are considering means instead of ends. By focusing on one solution, they virtually eliminate the others, which could be cheaper, better, and faster than the one selected.

Training Needs Assessment

The Training needs assessment is usually integrated into the Quasi needs assessment because both deal with training and task performance. According to Kaufman & Guerra-Lopez (2013), training is a means, a specific solution that is used to address gaps in knowledge, with the assumption that training will eliminate the gaps. Mager and Pipe (1999) present the idea that there are various types of knowledge gaps, and they do not all need training. Alternatives to close a knowledge gap might include job aids, updated training materials, or other more cost-effective solutions (as cited in Kaufman & Guerra-Lopez, 2013). The focus of a training needs assessment is to identify what people should know, with the assumption that training is the solution to the performance problem. Dick, Carey, and Carey (2009) suggest that questions be asked to determine what learners need to do rather than what they need to know (Guerra-Lopez in Richey, 2012). This connection to performance is what links training needs assessments with Quasi needs assessments and organizational development.

A training needs assessment is conducted at various levels of organizational results, including strategic (external impact), tactical (overall organizational results), and operational (internal deliverables), and is independent of any pre-determined solutions. Within an instructional context, this assessment is conducted at the learner level, by looking at gaps in knowledge and behaviors, then identifying gaps in knowledge that can help target desired results (Kaufman & Guerra-Lopez, 2013).

According to Rossett (1987) there are three initiators of training needs assessments. The first is performance problems, which are introduced by managers who see gaps in desired vs current performance. Performance problems are evident in situations where employees ought to know how to complete a specific task or process. The second is the introduction of new systems and technologies into the workplace. The problem is getting people acclimated to the new system so that they feel comfortable when using it. The third is automatic or habitual training, which occurs just because it has always been available, and it looks good when it is conducted, or the law requires it.

The challenge presented when conducting a training assessment is knowing whether the training produced any measurable results or improved performance. Training is often conducted because it is expected, scheduled, or seen as the solution to a performance problem before a Mega, Macro, or Micro assessment is conducted. This makes training unreliable as far as improving employee performance or determining noteworthy results. According to Kaufman and Guerra-Lopez (2013), this is because training techniques begin with the means and not the ends, which can lead to disappointing results.

Reflection Summary

In my many years of corporate and academic experience, I have never been asked to complete a needs assessment at any level. I have been asked to conduct training for various groups and departments, but even when I was involved in instructional design, a needs assessment was not part of the process. The ADDIE model was used, but assessment was not placed before analysis (Kaufman & Guerra-Lopez, 2013), and the designers were told by the subject matter experts what employees *should* know. It was then up to the designers to set up training solutions, but no one bothered to find out what employees *did* know.

This activity has made me aware of the importance of working from an overall system perspective (i.e. Mega level) to determine the value that the organization provides, but also determining the value that society provides to the organization (i.e. Macro level), and finally, to use this information to determine ways to improve employee performance (i.e. Micro level). Understanding how these levels provide an overall picture of the health of the organization and its employees will ensure that any future training assignments will provide measurable results that indicate a balance and order to the means and the ends of successful, relevant needs assessments.

This will be especially important as I work to complete this program and use what I have learned to become a better instructor and trainer. Instead of automatically deciding that training is the solution to performance issues, I will first complete needs assessments that provide me with the information necessary to determine what should be known vs what is known. This will enable me to improve learner performance by presenting needed and relevant information to my students instead of information that they already know. I am very excited about the project for this course, and hope that completing it will help me to provide more value to the institutions and students where I teach.

	Focus	When to Use	How Does it Work	Who Involved	Key Challenges
Mega - Level	organization's value to external clients and society	faced with significant change, threat, or opportunity; ensure long-term survival and profitability, engaged in strategic planning	identify ideal vision, indicators, and targets, identify current status of ideal vision, determine gaps between desired and current state, prioritize gaps based on costs and consequences of closing vs ignoring them, determine mission and functional objectives for the organization, and make recommendations to close them.	Reps from all relevant stakeholder groups; clients, community, society.	getting buy-in from all stakeholders; changing current practices; linking stakeholder priorities to the assessment
Macro - Level	organizational outputs and measurable benefits from society	ensure short-term profits; engaged in tactical planning	identify desired criteria/requirements linking Mega, Macro, and Micro gaps, identify current status of criteria/requirements, determine gaps between desired and current state, prioritize gaps based on costs and consequences of closing vs ignoring them, update or determine new requirements, and determine recommendations to close the gaps.	Representatives from all groups who could affect or be affected by the assessment.	org mission objectives not always related to results; lack of accountability leads to much inefficiency; collecting appropriate data; getting partners to document org needs and foci.
Micro - Level	performance level of individuals, groups, or departments	introduces changes that will impact job requirements and improved performance; engaged in operational planning	identify desired criteria/requirements linking Mega, Macro, and Micro gaps, identify current status of criteria/requirements, determine gaps between desired and current state, prioritize gaps based on costs and consequences of closing vs ignoring them, update or determine performance objectives, and determine recommendations to close the gaps.	Mid-level management, supervisors, employees, and customers affected by performance objectives.	Access to data not readily given; concern for negative reflection on performance; getting buy-in from partners difficult because of attention to their other responsibilities; gaining their trust.
Quasi - Level	training and org development	challenges related to processes or resources; implementing new process or resource; resource planning	identify desired criteria/requirements linking Mega, Macro, and Micro gaps, identify current status of desired criteria/requirements, determine gaps between desired and current state, prioritize gaps based on costs and consequences of closing vs ignoring them, update or determine new requirements, and determine recommendations to close the gaps.	relevant managers, supervisors, employees, customers, and anyone else who might be affected.	Ensuring that improving org processes and inputs will ultimately add value to human and org performance. Getting partners to consider alternatives that go beyond what they want to fix.
Training	knowledge and task performance	When org wants to identify what needs to be trained, therefore training is assumed to be the solution to the performance problem. Used to address gaps in knowledge to improve performance, but this is after a Micro level needs assessment.	Conducted at various levels of org results, including strategic(external impact), tactical (overall org results), and operational (internal deliverables), and independent of any pre-imposed solutions. Within an instructional context, is conducted at the learner level, by looking at gaps in knowledge and behaviors, then identifying gaps in knowledge that can help target desired results. Ask learners what they must be able to do, not what they must know.	Reps from all relevant stakeholder groups.	Can lead to disappointing results because techniques start with means and not ends.

References

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