assessments—strategic, tactical, and operational—in one interview, focus group, or survey, you can, for example, save time and money as well as reduce your stress.

Knowing why you are conducting the assessment and what decisions will be made based on its results are the essential foundations for success and are the ideal place to start.

How Do You Conduct a Basic Needs Assessment?

As with any organizational activity, it is best to start your needs assessment with a plan. Your plan will not only help guide the processes within your needs assessment but also help you manage the multiple steps and various partners throughout the assessment.

Depending on the size and scope of your needs assessment (corresponding to the decisions that your needs assessment will guide), you can create a useful plan for identifying needs, analyzing needs, and deciding what to do next (or at least making recommendations). By using this three-step process, you ensure that (a) your assessment focuses on results before solutions, (b) your needs are studied before decisions are made, and (c) your decisions are informed and justified.

For an assessment that is small in scope, you can include in your plan just the primary steps outlined as follows. For an assessment that is larger in scope, add more substeps and details as outlined later in the next section. Your larger-scale assessments will also likely benefit from involving a specialist in needs assessment (or potentially in evaluation) to lead or advise about the assessment. After all, larger assessments will typically involve more questions to be answered, more and different types of stakeholders, more people to gather information from, more information to be analyzed, and more partners in making informed choices. Adjusting the detailed processes within each step of your assessment gives you the flexibility to match your efforts to the desired scope.

That being said, it is important to recognize that although a formal needs assessment will generally follow the same basic steps, having ongoing informal needs assessments can be a necessary tool for responding to changing situations. Even after you complete a formal needs assessment, you should continue to collect information to monitor and evaluate the situation. When you recognize that needs are changing, you should either update the findings of the previous formal needs assessment or begin the process again to update recommendations.

Next are three basic steps that should be included in your plans for a successful needs assessment. In appendix A of this book, you will find additional information, tools, checklists, and resources for managing your assessment.

Identify

The first step in needs assessment is to identify needs (that is, gaps between desired and current results). Although it is often tempting to mix potential solutions (that is, activities or resources) with needs, your assessment will be much more effective if you focus exclusively on results to start. There will be plenty of time for debating potential solutions later in the process. After all, as Henry Kissinger is credited with saying, "If you do not know where you are going, every road will get you nowhere."

1. Identify your internal and external partners for the needs assessment. Colleagues, clients, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), development partners, and others may all be useful partners in making a quality decision.
2. Determine what data are required to identify needs (that is, gaps) at the strategic, tactical, and operational levels. In other words, what information is required to make an informed and justifiable decision?
3. Determine potential sources of data (for example, community members, documents, and so on) to inform your needs assessment. For instance, is a strategic plan available for the national or provincial government to help guide a tactical-level needs assessment?
4. Make arrangements to collect information that is not already available. Schedule interviews, create surveys, arrange focus groups, collect documents to be reviewed, train focus group facilitators, schedule performance observations, and so forth.
5. Pilot test interview protocols, questionnaires, and other information-gathering tools (see box 2.2).
6. Collect information using a variety of tools and techniques, and include sources that represent varying perspectives on the primary performance issues. Remember to listen—far more than you talk—when collecting information for your needs assessment.
7. Define needs on the basis of performance gaps between current and desired results. Link strategic, tactical, and operational needs to ensure alignment.

Box 2.2 Information-Gathering Tools in Part 3.A

Analyze

The analysis process links needs with the information required to make decisions about what actions should be taken. After all, every need does not require immediate action: causal factors must be reviewed, return-on-investment considerations must be weighed, and priorities must be set. At this point, many ideas for solutions or activities to improve results will be offered. These ideas should also be captured during the analysis, though the focus remains on better understanding the differences between current and desired results.

1. Establish an initial prioritization of needs on the basis of size, scope, distinguishing characteristics, and relative importance.
2. Conduct a needs analysis—for the highest-priority needs—to better understand what is working, what is not working, and what the systemic relationships are among needs.
3. Collect information (a) regarding the causal factors (or root causes) associated with what is not working and (b) leading to priority needs. Use multiple data-collection tools and techniques, and ensure that you capture a variety of perspectives.
4. Analyze and synthesize the useful information you have collected about the needs.

Box 2.3 Decision-Making Tools in Part 3.B

Decide

Making complex decisions based on the analysis is the next step (see box 2.3). This step is also often the hardest, given (a) competing interests for certain types of activities to occur, (b) difficulties in agreeing to the criteria to use in making the decisions, and (c) typical realities for negotiation and compromise. Nevertheless, information from steps 1 and 2 will increase the potential for making a justifiable decision that will lead to desired results.

1. Working with needs assessment partners, establish the criteria on which decisions will be made about what to do (for example, cost, time, impact).[3]
2. Identify multiple activities (that is, solutions) that in combination could achieve desired results. There are always multiple options to be considered, so it is important not to become fixated on any one solution until it can be compared with others against the agreed-upon criteria.
3. Evaluate each potential performance improvement activity to assess its value to your improvement effort.
4. Prioritize the identified needs on the basis of the cost to meet the need (that is, closing the gap) versus the cost of not meeting the need (that is, not closing the gap).[4]
5. Summarize your recommendations in a needs assessment report or presentation, and disseminate the information.

6. Evaluate your needs assessment process to determine if changes should be made before you complete your next assessment.

Use the three primary steps (identify, analyze, decide) as a general guide for your needs assessment. For informal needs assessments, these three steps and the recommended substeps may be enough to inform your decision.

How Do You Conduct a Larger-Scale Needs Assessment?

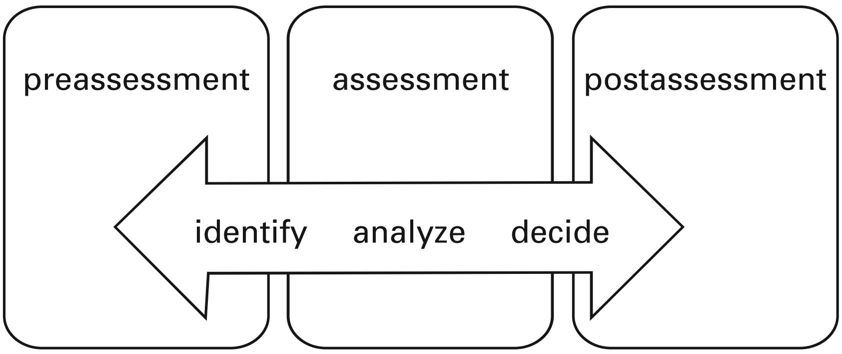
Larger-scale needs assessments typically require a more detailed and formal needs assessment process. If, for instance, you are planning a six-month needs assessment that requires the engagement of several government ministries and donor partners, then the three general steps of identify, analyze, and decide will not be sufficient.

In these cases, Jim Altschuld (2010) suggests that the needs assessment be conducted in three phases: preassessment activities, assessment activities, and postassessment activities.[5] The three previously discussed steps (identify, analyze, decide) can then be integrated into the assessment activities, providing a proactical approach to your assessment (see figure 2.1).

Phase 1. Preassessment

The purpose of this phase is to determine the overall scope and plan for the assessment so you ensure that implementation goes smoothly and generates justifiable information to make decisions. The preassessment phase relies

Figure 2.1 Needs Assessment Phases and Basic Steps



Source: Based in part on Altschuld 2010.

on using existing information as much as possible, rather than on collecting new information, to inform decisions.

1. With the sponsors of the assessment, determine the overall scope of the needs assessment.
2. Depending on the scope of the assessment, identify the primary performance issues that are leading to the needs assessment. To the extent possible, review existing information (such as earlier reports or surveys) to guide the assessment.
3. Define what data and information are required from the needs assessment to adequately inform decisions. This step may require that you collect some preliminary information from key stakeholders and partners to define objectives and select methods.
4. With others, create a management plan for the needs assessment (see appendix A).
5. Validate your management plan for the needs assessment with colleagues, peers, clients, partners, the assessment's sponsors, and others who will have a stake in the success of the assessment.

Phase 2. Assessment

The purpose of this phase is to implement the assessment in a methodologically sound manner that generates justifiable information to make decisions.

1. Make arrangements to collect the necessary information from the various sources. Schedule interviews, create surveys, arrange focus groups, collect documents to be reviewed, train group facilitators when necessary, schedule performance observations, and so forth.
2. Review protocols, questionnaires, and other information-gathering tools to verify that you capture the necessary information regarding both the current achievements and the desired accomplishments.
3. Collect information by (a) using a variety of tools and techniques and (b) including sources that represent varying perspectives on the primary performance issues.

4. Define needs on the basis of performance gaps between current and desired results.
5. Establish an initial prioritization of needs on the basis of size, scope, distinguishing characteristics, and relative importance.
6. For the highest-priority needs, create a plan for collecting information on the factors that are likely leading to the performance gaps.
7. Collect information regarding the causal factors (or root causes) associated with priority needs.
8. Analyze and synthesize the useful information you have collected.
9. For each priority need and its associated causal factors, identify multiple performance-improvement activities that in combination could address the complete need.
10. Evaluate each potential performance-improvement activity to assess its value to your improvement effort.
11. Use the information to prioritize needs and make recommendations regarding the improvement efforts that will best achieve desired results within the given context.

Phase 3. Postassessment

The purpose of this phase is to underscore that the assessment does not end once priorities have been set. Information from the assessment must be shared and used to guide decisions. Additionally, situations change, and you should routinely collect and assess information as part of ongoing monitoring and evaluation. This phase supports the implementation of recommendations and offers opportunities to take corrective actions where necessary.

1. Summarize your recommendations in a needs assessment report or presentation.
2. Communicate your draft findings to your stakeholders. For larger-scale assessments, this step may involve developing a dissemination strategy, communication strategies, and assessment reports and presentations. It is also good practice to share findings with people who provided information and other inputs for your assessment.

3. Integrate postassessment monitoring and evaluation activities into recommended activities that will be undertaken.
4. Evaluate your needs assessment process to determine if changes should be made before you complete your next assessment.

Build flexibility into your plan, but don't be tempted to take the first plausible solution that shows up and forget about the rest of the assessment that you have designed. Research by Paul Nutt (2008) at Ohio State University illustrates that this tendency, which he refers to as taking an *emergent opportunity*, leads to less-successful results from your decisions than if you follow through with the complete needs assessment, which he refers to as *discovery decision making*.[6]

Nevertheless, you can, for example, complete multiple tasks at the same time to save time and resources. Skipping steps or reversing the order of activities can, however, cause problems or lead to missed opportunities to improve performance. Therefore, especially for needs assessments with a larger scope, include dependencies that illustrate which tasks must be completed before subsequent steps can begin.

Lastly, continually review your needs assessment plan throughout the process to ensure that necessary results have been accomplished before moving on to subsequent, and dependent, tasks. If your assessment drifts away from a focus on performance and results, then it is better to know this change early so that corrective actions can be taken.

Who Should Be Involved in a Needs Assessment?

Needs assessments are rarely successful when performed as an individual activity. Instead, involve others inside and outside your organization to gain multiple perspectives on both the results that should be accomplished and the current levels of performance for comparison. From ministry officials and donor partners to internal managers and volunteers, having various partners represented in your needs assessment will improve the quality of your assessment and will create buy-in to the recommendations that follow.

Building a team (or a committee) to conduct the assessment is also essential to the success of your performance improvement efforts. Not only is a needs assessment typically more work than one individual can do, but also conducting a needs assessment with a single perspective can be dangerous.

Table 2.2 Sample Partners in a Needs Assessment for Regional Planning

	Strategic needs assessment	Tactical needs assessment	Operational needs assessment	Combined strategic, tactical, and operational
Information sources				
Clients	***	**	*	***
Customers	***	**	*	***
Community members	***	**	*	***
Senior managers	***	***	*	***
Functional heads or managers	**	***	***	***
Performers	*	**	***	***
Supervisors	*	**	***	***
Suppliers	**	**	***	**
Volunteers	**	**	***	**
Ministry officials	***	**	*	***
Elected officials	***	**	*	***
NGOs	***	**	*	***
Local community groups	***	**	*	***
Needs assessment team				
Executive sponsor	***	***	**	***
Project manager	***	***	***	***
Administrative staff	**	*	*	**
Data collection staff	*	**	**	**
Communications staff	***	**	*	***

Notes: See pages 39–40 for definitions of strategic, tactical, and operational needs assessments.

* = Valued partners who, if available, can improve the quality of your assessment.
** = Important partners who, although not essential, contribute to a successful assessment.
*** = Critical partners whose participation is essential for success.

The varied perspectives offered by others on your assessment team will add significant value to the information that you collect and the decision that you make.[7] Table 2.2 illustrates the relationship of multiple, potential partners for needs assessments of differing scopes.

How Long Will a Needs Assessment Take?

The time required to complete a practical needs assessment depends on many variables, from your previous experiences with needs assessments, to the availability of information within your organization, to the scope of your assessment. As a result, you can complete a quality needs assessment in as little time as a week, whereas more complex decisions may require an assessment that spans several months.

Answering the following questions can help you determine the time required for your needs assessment:

1. What is the scope of your needs assessment: strategic, tactical, operational, or all three? How many and how complex are the performance-related questions that your needs assessment is going to inform?
2. Has another needs assessment been completed within your organization in the past year?
3. Does your organization have a strategic plan that clearly links strategic, tactical, and operational performance objectives? Are data on current performance routinely collected to inform decisions in your organization?
4. Have you previously managed a needs assessment or an evaluation?
5. Do you, or do people working with you on the needs assessment, have experience in collecting, analyzing, and synthesizing information?
6. Are there project deadlines or external events that establish a "must complete by" date for the assessment?

Depending on your responses to these questions, the length of a needs assessment can vary from a few days to a couple of months. After answering the questions, use the needs assessment tools found in appendix A to estimate the number of days required for each assessment activity. Be sure to factor in that many of the steps can be completed simultaneously, but that there are also several that cannot be started until a previous step has been completed.

After all this planning, determine how much time you, and others, have to dedicate to the assessment. Review your commitments to other projects, your upcoming vacation schedule, and other events on your calendar that may extend the amount of time required to complete the assessment. Also factor in that others, especially those whom you are counting on to provide useful information, will be out of town, busy, or on holiday (or vacation) during this time.