identifying client needs

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A 3-hour training workshop has been scheduled for 4-H leaders. The Extension staff has put much time and effort into planning the workshop; yet only one-third of the leaders show up for the program. In examining why, the staff discover the leaders just weren't interested in the content of the program. Somehow, in planning this program, an important step in designing educational programs wasn't included—determining the educational needs of the potential participants.

An educational need is a discrepancy or gap between a person's present level and the preferred or required level of capabilities for effective performance as defined by the person, the organization, or society.[1] It's "a normative concept shaped by the social environment and involving values and judgments."[2]

Identifying educational needs of potential participants is an important component in designing educational programs. A needs assessment is a systematic way of determining these educational needs. . . .

Types of Educational Needs

There are two basic types of educational needs: prescriptive and motivational. A *prescriptive* need, usually organizational in origin, "is viewed as a condition or deficiency relative to a socially accepted standard, norm or end state."[3] An example of a prescriptive need would be the Extension director's desire that the county board become better informed on changes in Extension programs, and the effects of cuts in county budgets on Extension activities.

A *motivational* need "is a deficiency relative to a specific individually defined desired goal or end state."[4] An individual

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may want to learn how to conduct a more effective staff meeting or how to make a home more energy efficient.

Needs Assessment

The process for identifying educational needs is called a needs assessment—a systematic way to identify educational deficiencies or problems. Unlike traditional program planning, it focuses not on solutions for a specific problem or a way to solve a problem, but on identifying the major educational problem areas of Extension staff, volunteer leaders, and Extension clientele. In designing a needs assessment, it's important to ensure that both types of educational needs, those of the individual (motivational) and the organization (prescriptive), are addressed. Considering both needs will provide for a more effective and balanced educational program.

Needs Assessment Process

The needs assessment process involves 10 steps. They're outlined below with a specific example given for each step.

STEPS	*EXAMPLE*
Planning	**Statewide Needs Assessment of 4-H Training Leaders**
Step 1	
Conscious decision to complete a needs assessment process with a commitment to planning.	The 4-H State Advisory Board formally votes to conduct a needs assessment focused on the training needs of 4-H leaders.
Step 2	
Identification of individuals to be involved in the planning and overseeing of the needs assessment.	A steering committee of 6 people is appointed, composed of members of the 4-H State Advisory Board, Extension staff, and 4-H leaders.
Doing the Needs Assessment	
Step 3	
Development of the focus and specific objectives for the needs assessment (answering the questions one really wants to know).	The steering committee decides to focus the needs assessment on the following three questions: (1) What's the present knowledge/skill level of the 4-H leaders relating to specific content/skill areas? (2) In what areas would the 4-H leaders like to increase their knowledge/skill levels? (3) In what areas do Extension staff believe 4-H leaders need knowledge/skill?

Step 4

Determination of budget and time frame.	The steering committee determines it will need to complete the needs assessment in six months. Extension staff time is assigned to this task and $100 allotted for expenses.

Step 5

Selection of design and data collection techniques.	The techniques chosen for collecting data include key informant interviews, group meetings, and review of written materials related to 4-H programming and leadership training (see section on "Conducting Needs Assessment," which describes each of these techinques).

Step 6

Collection of data.	The key informant interviews are conducted by members of the steering committee. Twelve people in all will be interviewed: 6 leaders in 4-H, 4 county Extension staff, and 2 Extension specialists from the university. Group discussion sessions are led by Extension staff, with selected groups of 4-H leaders from at least 6 counties. A review of literature related to 4-H programming and leadership training is also completed by Extension staff.

Step 7

Analysis of data to determine points of agreement and disagreement.	An analysis of data collected is completed by Extension staff. The steering committee then reviews this analysis.

Priority Setting and Action Planning

Step 8

Rank ordering the needs from most critical to least critical in terms of ideal state (not necessarily the most feasible at this point).	The steering committee arrives at a consensus via group discussion on the rank ordering of training needs of the 4-H leaders.

Step 9

From rank order, selection of those needs for immediate attention (one must apply here a test of feasibility).	This task is completed by the 4-H leaders in each county using a nominal group technique (see subsection on "Group Meetings," which describes the nominal group technique).

Step 10

Development of specific objectives, plan of action, and evaluation procedures for the selected problems.	Using the results of the needs assessment, a state plan for 4-H leader training is developed by the state 4-H Extension staff in cooperation with the steering committee. Based on this state plan, Extension staff in cooperation with 4-H leaders in each county and/or groups of counties also develop an action plan. The state and county plans for 4-H leader training need to complement each other.

Conducting Needs Assessment

A variety of techniques can be used to determine the needs and interest of Extension staff, volunteers, and clientele. They range from highly structured techniques (mail surveys) to informal methods (coffee break discussions). The techniques may be used alone or in combination, depending on the objectives, the people involved, and funding available for the needs assessment. Some of the techniques for conducting a needs assessment are outlined below.

Surveys

A survey can "denote an extensive study of the needs and resources of a large community . . . or it can denote a brief superficial study of the 'situation' of a particular organization or agency."[5] Surveys can be conducted by mail, telephone, and/or individual or group interviews. Populations surveyed could include the entire community (or selected sample), community leaders, staff, volunteer leaders, program clientele, or a combination of the above.

The survey is "perhaps the best approach for eliciting the attitudes of a broad range of individuals."[6] If the instrument is properly constructed and tested, data obtained are usually reliable and valid. The major drawbacks to using this approach are: (1) cost in terms of both time and money, (2) the skill needed to design a valid and reliable instrument, and (3) the hesitation of individuals to answer surveys.

Key Informant Interviews

Information is obtained from people who are considered experts in the area based on their professional knowledge and/or their position of power with an organization.[7] The key informant interview "offers one of the easiest and least expensive ways to systematically assess needs."[8] It may help initiate or strengthen the lines of communication among individuals and organizations. The individuals to be interviewed must be chosen carefully to keep the bias factor associated with this technique to a minimum. It's also important to train the interviewers and use a standard instrument, whether the questions asked are closed or open-ended.

Consultation

An organization employs an expert in the field to provide expert judgment relating to a specific area(s) of individual and/or organizational needs. An expert can provide information and insights that aren't available within a local organizational setting.

This type of service can usually be obtained quickly if a group is working within a time-pressure situation. However, it's important to choose the right consultant for the problem to be addressed and not one who is just readily available. Disadvantages to using outside consultants include the cost, lack of trust by some people of an "outsider's" opinion, and a possible "one-shot" approach to identifying individual and/or community needs.

Observation

The observation of individuals and groups within an organization can provide an indication of interests and needs. Observation can be open-ended and unplanned or structured with specific variables to investigate.

Observing a situation is relatively easy to do and can be conducted as a part of an individual's regular job or other daily activities. One major drawback of observational techniques is that the information collected, unless the observations are highly structured, tends to be fragmented and not well-organized.

Group Meetings

Group meetings are an inexpensive way to gather information from a variety of people. They provide individuals with a mechanism for becoming actively involved in the educational planning process. The meetings may be formal (Board of Directors and staff meetings) or informal (coffee breaks, lunch).

Two keys to the successful use of a group meeting for conducting needs assessment are: (1) competent leadership and (2) group members who have both the knowledge and willingness to participate actively in such a session. The lack of one or both of the above ingredients will leave people frustrated and often dissatisfied with the entire educational process.

In using the group method for assessing community needs, you must be able to structure the group to ensure that the necessary data are generated during the group sessions. One group method, the *nominal group process,* ensures this participation. There are four basic steps to this process.

1. *Silent generation of ideas.* Participants are asked to respond to the problem presented on an individual basis. Without discussion, each participant writes down his/her thoughts on the topic presented.
2. *Round-robin listing.* Each participant in turn presents one of these ideas, which is listed verbatim on a blackboard or newsprint, until all ideas have been listed. This process should also be done without discussion.
3. *Discussion.* Discussion is led on the recorded ideas to clarify, elaborate on, and evaluate them. The items should be discussed in order, with none being eliminated.
4. *Ranking.* Each participant is asked to choose the 10 most important items from the list and rank them in priority. A group decision is made based on individual priority listings.[9]

Review of Written Materials

There's a variety of written material that can be reviewed. The purpose of doing this review is to determine what in the opinion of others are the educational needs of the group under study. Examples of materials include: (1) Extension records, annual reports, and files; (2) results of other needs surveys related to the group being studied; (3) books, journal articles, and other scholarly papers; and (4) other Extension publications.

Most written materials are usually available, inexpensive, and easy to obtain. Problems do arise in the actual review and analysis of the materials. This process can be both time-consuming and tedious. The information may not be in usable form, at least not in relation to the specific questions an individual is trying to answer.

Informal

A great deal can be learned about the educational needs of individuals and groups over coffee or lunch, by attending various community functions, in church, and at social gatherings. The key is to listen to what others are saying.

Summary

Identifying educational needs of potential participants is an important component in designing educational programs.

A needs assessment is a systematic way of determining these educational needs. Both the needs of the individual and the organization, in relation to a specific group, should be assessed. A variety of techniques, from highly structured (surveys) to very informal methods (coffee break discussions)can be used to assess educational needs of Extension staff, volunteers, and clientele. The process of conducting the needs assessment includes not only collecting and analyzing the data, but also priority setting and action planning in relation to the needs identified.

Footnotes

1. Paulette Beatty, "A Process Model for the Development of an Information Base for Community Needs Assessment: A Guide for Practitioners" (Paper presented at the 17th Annual Meeting of the Adult Education Research Conference, Toronto, April 7-9, 1976) and Nevin J. Robbins, "Understanding Human Need: A Conceptual Approach" (Paper presented at the Eastern Educational Research Association, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, March, 1981).
2. Daniel Arnold, ed., *Managing Human Services* (Washington, D.C.: International City Management Association, 1977), p. 33.
3. Beatty, "A Process Model for the Development of an Information Base for Community Needs Assessment," p. 6.
4. *Ibid.,* p. 7.
5. Roland Warren, *Studying Your Community* (New York: The Free Press, 1965), p. 307.
6. Frank A. Fear and others, *Needs Assessment in Community Development* (Ames: Iowa State University, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, 1978), p. 26.
7. John L. Trait, Janet Bokemeier, and Joe M. Bohlen, *Identifying the Community Power Actors: A Guide for Change Agents,* North Central Regional Publication 59 (Ames: Iowa State University, no date).
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9. A. Delbecq, *Group Techniques for Program Planning: A Guide to Nominal Group Technique and Delphi Process* (Glenview, Illinois: Scott Foresman & Co., 1975) and David L. Ford, Jr., and Paul M. Mamiorff, "Applied Group Problem-Solving: The Nominal Group Technique," in the *1975 Annual Handbook for Group Facilitators,* John E. Jones and J. William Pheiffer, eds. (LaJolla, California: University Associates, 1975), pp. 179-82.