

Conducting a Training Needs Assessment

By Jeannette Swist, CMC, SPHR

Introduction

A review of literature indicates that training programs are often prescribed as the drug of choice to problem situations in organizations. How often have you heard, "We've got a training problem..." or "They're not doing it the way they're supposed to..."? Often these statements are only *symptoms* of a problem. Until the problem is understood in greater detail, proposing a solution or an intervention can be a costly and fruitless endeavor. Often overlooked as the first step in the performance improvement process is the training needs assessment. A *need* is not a want or desire. It is a gap between "what is" and "what ought to be". The needs assessment serves to identify the gaps, and considers if the problem can be solved by training. The assessment is part of a planning process focusing on identifying and solving performance problems.

Why Conduct a Training Needs Assessment?

- To determine what training is relevant to your employees' jobs,
- To determine what training will improve performance,
- To determine if training will make a difference,
- To distinguish training needs from organizational problems, and
- To link improved job performance with the organization's goals and bottom line.

In reading different articles and books, you will come across the words *need assessment* and *need analysis*. The terms are interchangeable, but they have the same meaning and purpose, to assess and analyze. The primary purpose of the training needs assessment - analysis process is to ensure that there is a need for training and to identify the nature of the content of the training program. Conducting an assessment is a way to collect information that can be used to decide what type of development will be perceived as relevant and useful. An assessment enables a conversation to take place that questions what skills and knowledge is required to be more effective. It is important that we view training or performance improvement efforts as a "system" not a "silo". Our efforts to improve one part of the organizational system will affect other jobs in the workplace environment. The needs assessment process is an important first step in the development of a training program or performance improvement initiatives.

A needs assessment provides an opportunity to consult with a variety of people in the organization. The information collected, ideas generated, and the conversations that take place when people discuss their work lives lend enthusiasm to the process. The data collected - whether obtained through interviews, observations, focus groups, performance data, questionnaires or tests - can clarify issues and provide a focus on performance.

Needs Assessment Methods: *Scenarios*

The format a needs assessment can take can vary. Generally, an assessment is conducted as a survey. However, you may develop questions and conduct individual interviews or focus groups. Or, you can collect and analyze performance data to

determine common needs. We will explore these areas through the use of personal observations; additional assessments may include on-site observation, testing and assessment centers. On-site observations should be conducted by individuals who are experienced and knowledgeable with regard to performing a *task analysis* of the work processes, procedures, methods, and practices being observed. These individuals are referred to as subject matter experts (SME's) and they can be found both inside and outside the organization. Typically, SME's are individuals who once worked in the position and have the in-depth knowledge of the concepts, and processes. Subject matter experts offer the troubleshooting information you may need to determine whether additional training is needed, whether the situation is indicative of a needed intervention. If you plan to use testing and assessment centers, or both, you will want to check into validation and reliability studies to ensure compliance with legal requirements.

Scenario One - Surveying Needs

Let's say you work for a small to mid-size company and the president calls you into the office and says, "The organization has identified projected business goals, and we need be certain that (1) our management team understands the implications on an operational level, and (2) we get feedback to ascertain what types of assistance we need to give to our managers to support their needs." Consider the use of a questionnaire for this *organizational analysis*. *Figure 8-1 gives an example.*

Operational Effectiveness Survey (Figure 8-1)

Please answer each question below:

1. Do you feel the vision of where the company is going over the next several years has been communicated to the management team? Yes No
2a. If yes, describe in a few words what your understanding is of that vision.
- 2b. By what means was the message communicated?
3. Identify the three most important strengths the company brings to its customers?
4. What three things must the company do better to be a leader among its competition in the marketplace?
5. To become the most valuable supplier to our customers, we must?
6. In your opinion, who are the company's three main competitors?
7. From a customer perspective, what do you think are the most important measures of the company's success?
8. From an internal perspective, what do you think are the most important measures of the company's success?
9. If you were going to start-up a national competitor, what are the three most significant things you would do differently?
10. Rank the following strategic issues from 1 (most important) to 7 (least important):
 - 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Improved information system
 - 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Improved product/service pricing
 - 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Customer service effectiveness
 - 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Explicit corporate vision
 - 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Defined goals and objectives
 - 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Improved process performance measurement
 - 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Total Quality Management
11. When was your last personal performance evaluation?
12. If you have had a performance review, do you recall whether you were able to discuss needs and issues at that review?

13. What should an orientation program for new managers include?
14. What three key activities should we work to improve over the next 2-3 years?
15. Can you identify any training needs that would help you in meeting the operational goals of your unit?

A survey of this type provides both qualitative and quantitative data for planning purposes. It also says to the members of the management team that the organization wants them to succeed. If the survey, results and subsequent feedback are used to determine training content, or operational level changes, managers will feel their input helped human resources facilitate the change effort.

Scenario Two - Interviewing Methods

What do you do when a department manager wants a training program to solve what they think is a problem? Is training the answer? If training is the answer, what content should be covered?

Is the problem centering on an individual performer level or a joint work-in-progress level? This situation may best be served by conducting a problem analysis interview. First, set up a time to meet with the department manager. Prepare for that meeting by developing open-ended questions to determine more completely what the manager believes should be happening, as well as to understand the current situation. *Here are some examples:*

1. Describe the situation you have encountered?
2. What do you observe that indicates there is a problem?
3. What specifically is the performer doing wrong? Doing right?
4. Probe frequency: **How often** does it occur?
5. Probe location: **Where** does it occur?
6. Probe timing: **When** is it a problem?
7. Probe longevity: **How long** has it been a problem?
8. Probe identity: **Who** is the performer in question?
9. Probe desired performance: **What** is the desired performance?
10. Probe who else is affected: **What** or **who else** is affected by the performer?
11. Probe cost value of discrepancy: **How much** is the problem costing the organization?
12. What are some of the reasons you think training is needed?
13. What is the end result you are seeking from a training intervention?
14. If I were to go out and talk to the employee(s) involved, what would they say?

Keep in mind that we are conditioned to ask questions about things that aren't working well - the problems, so that we can fix them. Try to find out about the successes - what has worked? In a consulting assignment with a floor-tile manufacturer who wanted to decrease the number of loss time incidents, we suggested what they considered to be quite innovative: interviewing employees who have been accident free since their last incident so we could learn what they have done differently. Also, consider the on-site observation as a secondary data-gathering method. Remember, the SME can be of great assistance in regard to work processes, procedures, methods, and practices being observed. For example, you might bring in an SME to perform a safety assessment of the plant operations and a task analysis of the work being performed on the line.

Training is not a panacea. What is occurring in the department may only be a symptom, and treating it with a training program may only be a "Band-Aid approach" at best.

Scenario Three - Data Gathering

With the continuing emphasis on competency development, companies are seeking individuals who consistently meet or exceed performance requirements and organizational goals. In turn, more and more companies are turning to 360-degree feedback, also referred to as multi-rater assessments (MRA), and to testing or assessment centers. These tools play a key part in a training needs assessment from the standpoint of a continuous improvement process!

The first source of acquiring assessment information is to define the abilities desired of managers -competencies, knowledge, skills, tasks, behaviors and actions. This has been the function of job analysis, and the resulting job descriptions. As companies continue to go through change, these analyses and descriptions require continuous updating. However, these descriptions become the basis for evaluating levels of competence, which can help HR practitioners assess needs for training and development programs. These descriptions are one source of assessment information.

A second source of assessment information has been performance evaluation data. The purpose of evaluation was to help individuals to enhance those areas needing improvement. The difficult task of assessing how well people are doing their jobs has traditionally fallen to supervisors and managers, even though they are usually not in the best position to observe employee performance on a regular basis. More companies are turning to MRAs or 360-degree feedbacks. This technological evolution has a profound implication. *Managers now have a tool for separating the evaluation of abilities for developmental purposes from the evaluation of performance results!* MRA's involve identifying key direct reports (such as peers, internal customers, the employee's manager, subordinates, and the employee's manager's manager) to participate in a performance evaluation. An MRA is an assessment tool that involves each employee in developing a performance enhancement plan. From this information, companies can identify potential training programs and can track and evaluate progress.

A third source of information may be for the company to use a managerial evaluation or assessment center to develop individuals in career pathing or a succession planning process. There are tests and assessment center processes that assess skills, aptitudes and behaviors for specific jobs. Through administration, the company would then receive objective feedback on which candidates currently possess characteristics, or on certain developmental areas necessary for candidates in a career path or succession plan. Some of the typical functions assessed for managerial level candidates include setting organizational objectives, managing budgets, improving work procedures, coordinating interdepartmental work activities, developing teamwork, and making decisions.

A fourth source of information is the identification of exemplary performers who are meeting and exceeding performance criteria. The information gained through the use of interviews can be utilized to evaluate career pathing and succession planning and to improve the development of the workforce. In an assignment with a major restaurant chain, our interviews focused on three areas: (1) the current position and what skills and experiences prepared employees for success; (2) the challenges of the current position and what knowledge, skills or experiences would have helped prepare employees; and (3) the impact (if any) that employees feel organizational changes have or will have on the work they do.

Obviously, when you consider implementing a training program, assessment work is mandatory. A great deal of information is required before you can move forward with

a performance improvement effort designed for organizational impact. The HR professional plays a key role in contributing to performance effectiveness within the organization.

We are pleased to announce that "*Conducting a Training Needs Assessment*" is published in the book "Effective Human Resource Measurement Techniques" and is available through the Society for Human Resource Management.

Please contact us if you have any questions regarding training needs assessments or if you would like to speak with Jeannette Swist. We would also appreciate your comments on the ideas presented. Phone 630-778-1231, or toll-free at: 1-888-ARM-7745, E-Mail: jswist@hr-arm.com Web Site: <http://www.hr-arm.com>