# Chapter 1

# Assessing Needs



**LEARNING OUTCOMES**

In this chapter, you will learn

- To identify key steps in the needs-assessment process
- To select appropriate methods to gather data
- To develop questions for a variety of needs-assessment techniques
- To apply the needs-assessment process to a specific organization and situation

## Understanding the Needs-Assessment Process

Every year companies spend thousands and thousands of dollars in training programs that fail. Why? Because they fail to provide programs that meet the specific business needs of the organization and the specific professional development needs of the employee.

A needs assessment is the core of any training program. It gives you the basis for program development and establishes the criteria for measuring the success of the program after its completion.

## What Is a Needs Assessment?

Needs assessors are much like physicians who ask a series of questions and order a battery of medical tests to uncover and treat the causes rather than the symptoms of an ailment. Needs assessment is the process of determining the cause, extent, and appropriate cure for organizational ills. The process addresses the organizational context and combines organizational analysis, data gathering, and interviewing techniques to identify and shrink the gap between desired and actual knowledge, skills, and performance. It is a careful study of the organizational context, the job itself, and the knowledge, skills, and abilities of the job incumbents.

Simply put, the process identifies the desired performance and the current performance. The difference or the gap between the actual and the desired level of performance becomes the training need and provides the basis for the training design. The correct problem identification (cause) is the key to developing and implementing appropriate corrective measures (proper cure).

## Why Conduct a Needs Assessment?

Before we address how to conduct a needs assessment, we need to take a look at the reasons for doing one. Overall, the purpose of a needs assessment is to prevent a quick-fix, bandage approach to business problems. Instead, a needs assessment, if you do it properly, will ensure that the solution(s) addresses the real issue(s) and effectively focuses the appropriate resources, time, and effort toward a targeted solution. The following are some valid reasons for conducting a needs assessment.

**To Determine Whether Training Is Needed.** Poor performance is not always a training issue. Often performance problems are the result of poor management practices, organizational barriers, or inadequate systems or equipment. A needs assessment, if conducted properly, will determine whether training is necessary and avoid the mistake of applying a training solution to a non-training problem. If it is determined that the problem does require training, the needs assessment will help you identify the performance issues that training should address.

**To Determine Causes of Poor Performance.** As noted above, poor performance can be the result of many other factors, including poor incentives, lack of internal motivation, the work environment, poor management, inadequate skills and knowledge, or the employees' lack of confidence. Sometimes, the cause may be poor management. Poor management practices might include poor hiring decisions, poor communication, unclear expectations, or inadequate coaching and feedback. For example, there is a saying that "ducks don't climb trees." Unfortunately, corporations are full of "ducks" in positions that require "cats," and no matter how hard they try, they will never succeed in their positions. In other words, if employees are put in positions for which they are unsuited, all the training in the world will not improve their performance. In other cases, managers fail their employees by not stating clearly their expectations or standards of performance.

Often employees do not know what is expected of them. They may have the knowledge, skills, and ability to do the job quite well but are not meeting the manager's expectations. If that is the case, then the training needs to be directed toward the manager rather than the manager's employees.

**To Determine Content and Scope of Training.** A needs assessment will help determine the type of training necessary to achieve results. Should it be workshop, self-study, or on-the-job? It will help you identify how long the training program should be and who the target audience is. It will also help you identify what should be included in the program and the degree of urgency.

**To Determine Desired Training Outcomes.** The needs assessment will help you determine what knowledge, skills, and attitudes need to be addressed during the training. It will also help distinguish "need to know" from "nice to know." By focusing on what the trainees actually need to know in order to do their jobs better, a program can be developed that will get results.

**To Provide Basis of Measurement.** A needs assessment provides a baseline against which to measure results or changes. It is simply a starting point.

**To Gain Management Support.** By involving line management and other key organizational players, you will find the support you need for the training program to succeed. Because they have had input, they will have a vested interest in the program. Management commitment comes if managers and supervisors see that you are developing training programs in direct response to their specific needs.

## Needs-Assessment Process

The needs-assessment process can be as detailed and involved as needed or desired. Many factors must be taken into consideration, including time, money, number of people involved, resources available, and so forth.

A full-blown needs assessment is both time-consuming and costly. Frankly, few organizations are willing to make that kind of investment. A typical alternative is to conduct an abbreviated form of needs assessment, using only two or three methods.

Table 1.1 offers a comparison between an in-depth and an abbreviated needs assessment.

## Whom to Assess

The people assessed depends on the goal and the required depth of the assessment. Consider the following categories of people and then decide which groups to target as data sources.

**Senior Management.** To get a clear picture of the problem and its business impact, start with senior management. Ask more strategic questions that address the direction of the organization as well as anticipated industry changes. In other words, start

**Table 1.1. In-Depth Versus Mini Needs Assessment**

| | In-Depth | Mini |
|---|---|---|
| Type of Information | Quantitative | Qualitative |
| Methods | Multi-tiered approach<br>Surveys<br>Observation<br>Interviews<br>Focus groups<br>Document reviews | Interviews<br>Focus groups |
| Scope | Widespread organizational involvement<br>Broad-ranging objectives | Fewer people involved<br>Short-term focus |
| Length | Several months to a year | Few days to a week |
| Cost | Expensive | Inexpensive |
| Focus | Linked to defined outputs<br>Long-term | Immediate, quick results |
| Exposure/Visibility | High profile and risk | Lower risk |

with an organizational context. If you are an internal consultant, you should already have a good idea of the issues driving the need for training. If you are external, you will probably need to do some research first and then ask specific questions to gain better insight into the organizational issues that can be addressed through training.

Here are some questions that will help you gain a better understanding of the organization's business needs:

- "What is the vision of the organization?"
- "What is the mission of the organization?"
- "What are the primary goals and objectives, both short-term and long-term?"
- "What organization or industry issues are driving the need for training?"
- "What is your most critical concern right now?"

**Target Population.** It is also important to identify the target population, those who will receive the training. Often they are overlooked. They should be contacted to find out both their perceived and real training needs. If they are not consulted, it is unlikely they will have a sense of ownership or "buy-in," and they will most likely approach the training experience with resistance and resentment.

**Target Population's Managers.** Those who manage members of the target population are a critical source of data, since the purpose of the training is to help the line manager solve a business problem or meet a business need. These business needs may include improved productivity, decreased errors, fewer accidents, increased business, decreased turnover or absenteeism, or fewer customer complaints.

**Direct Reports.** When the target population consists of managers or supervisors, good sources of data are those who report to these people. Direct reports can often provide valuable insight into the skills that managers and supervisors need to improve.

**Co-Workers or Peers.** More and more organizations are using 360-degree feedback as part of their assessment process, providing employees with performance feedback from multiple sources. Talking with or surveying the target population's co-workers or peers, for example, can provide valuable insight into the skills necessary for a successful team environment. The more organizations that use cross-functional teams, the more critical the need becomes to involve other team members in the assessment process.

**Human Resource Personnel.** The human resources (HR) department is probably the best source of records and documents. They, of course, will have data on turnover, grievances, safety violations, and so forth, as well as performance appraisals and the like. The HR professionals can also provide interesting insight into the organization's culture.

**Vendors.** Vendors are a good source of qualitative data. They can share their perceptions of the organization or specific departments with which they interact, plus give some valuable insights into industry standards and practices.

**Customers (Internal and External).** Customer surveys provide quantitative data that can help pinpoint specific deficiencies, that is, gaps between desired and actual behavior. Survey data will provide information on the level of satisfaction relative to customer-service practices, the quality of the product or service, and delivery systems.

For example, an organization may survey external customers to determine customer satisfaction regarding a call center's activity, such as response time in answering the telephone, friendliness of the service representative, ability to solve the customer's problem, and turnaround time for a request. An internal customer satisfaction survey will include similar items but would be targeted to a specific department. The systems or information technology (IT) department, for example, may choose to send a survey to all the other internal departments it supports to identify how well IT is meeting the needs and expectations of its internal customers.

**Competitors.** Published competitor data such as sales results, market share, stock prices, and financial reports help to identify the organization's position in relation to its competitors and helps to pinpoint areas for improvement. Gather these data from an organization's annual report or from trade publications.

**Industry Experts or Observers.** Industry experts have their thumbs on the pulse of the business in which your organization is engaged. They identify trends and industry standards against which your organization can measure itself. Experts may be identified through trade publications, where they may have written about the industry or may have been cited by others as experts in the field. One can also learn about and from experts by attending their sessions at professional conferences and "surfing the Internet" for appropriate websites.

# How to Conduct a Needs Assessment

Exhibit 1.1 provides an overview of the needs-assessment process.

## Step One: Identify Problem or Need

A good place to start is to take a look at the organization's statements of vision, mission, values, and goals. Ask to look at the strategic plan. If these organizational data do not exist, suggest that these statements and documents be developed before addressing any training issues. Because the purpose of training is to help solve organizational problems, you must have a clear understanding of what the business problems are.

The first step is to identify the problem or need, stated in dollar terms, if possible. Find out what the problem is costing the organization in errors, turnover, lost business, or additional help. Remember that the *desired outcome minus the current outcome identifies the need.*

After the need has been determined, define the specific objective the training program should meet. The objective must state the desired performance or behavior and be measurable, observable, realistic, and "fixable." Working with line managers, determine what to measure and how to tie it to organizational goals. Outcomes relate to the specific need. For example, the goal or outcome of safety training is to reduce accidents by a particular percentage. Customer service training should result in fewer customer complaints.

While examining possible causes, it is important to ask, "Is the problem due to a lack of knowledge or skill or is it operational?" For example, improper telephone use may have been identified as the problem. Incoming calls are being disconnected when the person who answers the call tries to transfer his or her calls. At first glance, it might appear that the people handling inbound calls need telephone skills training. However, if the telephone system is not set up to handle multiple functions, then training will not solve the problem.

## Step Two: Determine Needs-Assessment Design

To determine the true causes, not just the symptoms, of the problem or need, employ several investigative tools and techniques, including interviews, surveys, questionnaires, observation, and document examination. Choose investigative or data-collection methods on the basis of their appropriateness to the problem. The

## EXHIBIT 1.1. Needs Assessment Process

**Step One: Identify Problem or Need**

- Determine organizational context
- Perform gap analysis
- Set objectives

**Step Two: Determine Needs Assessment Design**

- Establish method-selection criteria
- Assess advantages and disadvantages of methods

**Step Three: Collect Data**

- Conduct interviews
- Administer questionnaires
- Administer surveys
- Review documents
- Observe people at work

**Step Four: Analyze Data**

- Conduct qualitative analysis
- Conduct quantitative analysis
- Determine solutions/recommendations

**Step Five: Provide Feedback**

- Write report
- Make an oral presentation
- Determine next step

choice of methods will depend on various criteria such as time, cost, or available resources. These criteria, as well as the advantages and disadvantages of various data-collection methods will be explained later in Chapter 1.

## Step Three: Collect Data

Many methods are available for conducting a needs assessment.

**Data-Collection Methods and Tools**

- Interviews
- Questionnaires
- Attitude surveys
- Observation
- Tests of proficiency
- Organizational statements and plans
- Turnover records
- Performance appraisals
- Procedures, handbooks, or audits
- Training evaluations
- Exit interviews
- Samples of work
- Job descriptions
- Complaints, error rates, and rejects
- Call reports, incident reports, and grievances
- Trade, government, and business publications

**Criteria for Selecting a Method.** From the rather extensive list of methods, select those most appropriate for the situation. Many factors will determine which methods to select. Look at the criteria in Exhibit 1.2, think about your own needs-assessment situation, and determine which criteria you believe should be taken into consideration.

**EXHIBIT 1.2. Method Selection Criteria**

- Time
- Cost
- Number of people involved
- Workplace disruption
- Complexity
- Confidentiality
- Trust level
- Comfort level, knowledge, expertise of assessor
- Validity
- Reliability
- Adaptability
- Participant-friendly



**Advantages and Disadvantages of Data-Collection Methods.** Data-collection methods fall roughly into six categories: open-ended questionnaires, closed-ended questionnaires, survey instruments, interviews, observation, and document examination.

To help determine which data-collection methods to use, it is a good idea to look at the advantages and disadvantages of each, as shown in Table 1.2. Weigh these considerations against your chosen criteria.

The most common approaches are covered in detail below.

**Interviews.** Whether for an in-depth or an abbreviated needs assessment, one-on-one and group interviews are valuable data sources. When developing interview questions, be sure to ask open-ended rather than closed-ended questions. Closed-ended questions can be answered with a simple "yes" or "no." For example, a question such as "Do you think there is a need for training?" elicits a one-word response. Probe further by asking an open-ended question. To get to the heart of the matter right away, ask a question that begins with "how" or "what" such as, "What would help you do your job better?" Try to avoid asking questions that begin with "why." First, people may not know why. Also, "why" questions tend to put people on the defensive.

**Table 1.2. Advantages and Disadvantages of Data-Collection Methods**

| | **Advantages** | **Disadvantages** |
|---|---|---|
| Open-Ended Questionnaires | Allow respondent to introduce new topics<br>Easy to develop<br>Inexpensive to administer | Communication is one-way<br>Respondents may not want to put comments in writing<br>Prone to ambiguity and opinions |
| Closed-Ended Questionnaires | Easier to answer<br>Inexpensive to administer<br>Feeling of anonymity and confidentiality ensured<br>Less time-consuming | Limited information<br>Require more skill and work to prepare<br>Items subject to misinterpretation<br>Difficult and time-consuming to construct |
| Instruments | Validated through research<br>Quickly and easily administered<br>Can be administered in groups<br>Scored quickly | Administration and coordination needed<br>Difficulty in choosing most appropriate<br>Difficult and time-consuming to construct<br>Need to research different types |
| Individual or Group Interviews | Can read nonverbal messages<br>Easier to talk<br>Build commitment for training<br>Clarifies expectations<br>Can introduce new topics<br>More detailed information | Time-consuming<br>Some people may feel threatened<br>Can be affected by interviewer bias<br>Difficult to organize and analyze data<br>People may be influenced by peers |
| Observation | Better understanding of variables<br>Provides real-life data and examples that can be used in course material<br>Real situations, highly relevant<br>Relatively low cost | Time-consuming<br>Requires some knowledge of the job<br>People may be anxious, nervous<br>Difficult to record data |
| Analysis of Existing Information | Factual, highly valid information<br>Easy access to many sources in one place<br>Inexpensive and not very time-consuming<br>Unobtrusive<br>Provides specific examples | May be outdated<br>May not cover all areas needed; too generic<br>Risks misinterpretation<br>May be biased |

**Sample Interview Questions.** Plan to take considerable time and care in writing questions. Not only should they be designed to elicit as much information as possible, but the questions must produce answers that will provide meaningful information. Although questions will vary according to the specific situation, some sample questions are included below that may help. After reading sample interview questions, make a list of questions you might ask. Be sure to identify your interviewees. Different sets of questions are required for the employees in the target audience and their managers.

**Questions for Target Audience**

- "What is a typical day for you?"
- "With whom do you interact on a regular basis?"
- "What are the typical situations, customers, or projects that you deal with?"
- "What training have you received to prepare you for this position?"
- "What additional training do you think you need to help you do your job better?"
- "What are the most difficult aspects of your job?"
- "What do you like best about your job?"
- "How do you know you are doing a good job?"
- "What type of feedback do you receive about your job performance?"
- "How often do you receive feedback?"

**Questions for Managers of Target Audience**

- "What would you like your employees to do differently?"
- "How would you describe the current level of performance in your department (or unit or team)?"
- "What are the important issues, problems, or changes your employees face at the present time?"
- "What skills, knowledge, or behaviors do you think your employees need to acquire or improve on in order to do their jobs better?"
- "What are the potential barriers that might get in the way of your training efforts?"
- "What methods do you use to measure employee performance?"

- "How often do you give feedback to your employees about their performance?"
- "What is the biggest challenge you face as a manager?"

As mentioned earlier, communication is critical throughout the process. Interviews must be carefully planned and executed. The following guidelines will help you to conduct interviews smoothly and efficiently.

- *Schedule in Advance.* Be respectful of people's time. Be sure to contact your interviewees well in advance of the interview and arrange meetings at their convenience. If they view an interview as an imposition and a disruption, they will probably not be as forthcoming or cooperative in responding to questions. It is also helpful to send the questions in advance so they can prepare or think about their answers. This preparation will enable the interview to move along more efficiently, and the interviewees' answers will be more meaningful.
- *Prepare an Agenda.* Good meeting management includes an agenda, prepared and sent out well in advance of the meeting. Needs-assessment interviews are no exception. Be sure to indicate the purpose and provide some direction or guidelines on how the interviewees can prepare for the interview. Of course, also include logistical information such as the date, location, and the time (both starting and ending).
- *Ensure Privacy.* This point should be a given; however, unless you take special care to arrange for a private meeting spot ahead of time, you might find yourself meeting in a less-than-ideal environment.
- *Eliminate Distractions and Interruptions.* Once again, planning is key. Take the necessary steps to ensure that you are not interrupted during the interview. In many cases, this means that you will need to communicate the importance of the interview session in advance and request that the interviewee do whatever it takes to maintain an interruption-free environment. If possible, try to conduct the interview away from the work site.
- *Clarify Purpose.* Begin the interview by clarifying the purpose of the meeting. Emphasize the importance of the needs assessment process and clearly explain the entire process and what you are going to do with the information. Give interviewees an opportunity to ask questions about the process before beginning the formal interview session.

- *Stress Confidentiality.* Assure all interviewees that their answers and remarks will be held in the strictest confidence. Be sure to explain how the information will be used. Focus groups, in particular, need to be reminded that, although the speaker's identity will be protected, what the person says will be recorded. It is critical that members of the focus group respect one another and not divulge any information shared within the group.
- *Use Good Communication Techniques.* To be an effective interviewer, hone your active listening skills, particularly your ability to clarify and confirm. Interviewees are prone to rambling and talking in generalities. Make sure that you understand clearly what the other person is saying. The following communication techniques will help you to gather the information you need:

  "Tell me more about. . . ."

  "Give me an example of. . . ."

  "Let me make sure I understand. What I heard was. . . ."

  "If I heard you correctly, you believe that. . . ."

  Whatever you do, don't say, "What you mean is. . ." or "What you're saying is. . . ." These statements imply that the speaker is not articulate enough to express himself or herself, and you have to help him or her out.

*Observation.* Observation involves a person who has received training in observation skills actually observing others on the job. Trained observers look for specific behaviors and are skilled in writing down their observations objectively in concrete behavioral terms. Observations are often used to validate information gathered by other methods such as interviews or questionnaires. Another observation technique makes use of an outside "shopper." Some organizations (banks, retail sales) hire outside professionals to conduct telephone or face-to-face shopping surveys. With this method, representatives from the consulting company go into a store or branch office and pretend to be customers. They note specific behaviors such as how they were greeted, friendliness, and knowledge level of the employees. They may look for evidence of cross-selling efforts or an offer of further assistance.

*Questionnaires/Survey Instruments.* An important consideration in using instruments is whether to develop them or purchase them. Questionnaires with open-ended questions are easy to construct, whereas questionnaires with closed-ended questions require more time and thought. Although published surveys can be costly, using them can not only save you time, but will yield more accurate information because they have been tested for validity and reliability. Be aware, however, that published instruments may or may not be specific enough for a given situation. For both questionnaires and surveys, be sure to send a cover letter to participants explaining the purpose and what will be done with the results of the instrument. Make the instructions crystal clear.

## Step Four: Analyze Data

Data analysis can be simple or quite complex, depending on the methods chosen. For *qualitative* data, such as individual or group interviews, as well as open-ended questionnaires and observation, do a content analysis, sorting information into categories (for example, positive and negative reactions) and identifying common themes. The goal of the content analysis is to categorize and quantify the data as much as possible with minimal interpretation.

For *quantitative* data (survey instruments and close-ended questionnaires), do a statistical analysis. Keep it as simple as possible. Do not become engulfed in number-crunching activities. Look at the data in terms of mean (the average, calculated by adding all the values and dividing by the number in the group), mode (the number that occurs most frequently), and median (the middle number in a numerical listing).

If your research indicates that training is appropriate, specify the type of training called for. Should it be workshop training, on-the-job, self-study, computer-based, or what? Training must address the problem specifically, and the systems must be in place to support the training outcomes. For example, you may identify a customer-service training program as the solution to customer complaints and lost business. Participants in the training will learn how to handle customer complaints tactfully and respond to customer inquiries politely and efficiently. Yet the program will fail if slow delivery makes it hard for the customer to buy the product.

**Clarify and Define the Problem.** Although the problem may have been stated at the beginning of the needs assessment process by the key players in the organization, those are really *perceptions* of the problem. The data-collection process and subsequent analysis of that data will help to clarify and to define the *real* problem.

**NEEDS-ASSESSMENT EXAMPLE**

A client asked me to deliver a stress management program for a group of executive secretaries. In a discussion with my contact, the training director, I probed to uncover what events may have triggered the request. During a recent company-wide employee meeting, several secretaries were quite outspoken in expressing their dissatisfaction with the way they were being treated. As a result, senior management concluded that this group needed stress management. Although actual performance had not been affected, the morale and interpersonal relationships were deteriorating rapidly. I suggested that, before I developed a program specific to their situation, it would be a good idea to talk with a few members of the target audience. The training director agreed, and we arranged a focus group meeting with six of the secretaries. As I listened to the secretaries, it became increasingly clear that most of the stress the secretaries were experiencing stemmed from a single cause: the inability of the secretaries and managers to communicate effectively with one another. After listening to the secretaries' complaints and perceptions of the problem, I concluded that a stress management program was not the answer. In fact, it would be a waste of time and money. I suggested that we attack the cause of the problem, not its symptoms. I recommended that I design and deliver a program that would promote open, two-way communication between each secretary and her immediate supervisor by showing them how to improve their communication skills and to work more effectively as members of a boss/secretary team.

During the analysis phase, you will add to your perceptions of the problem through qualitative data such as interviews and focus groups. Verify your perceptions with survey results and other quantitative data. After categorizing the data, the next step is to identify priorities, always keeping in mind the business need. The prioritization process is extremely important since your needs assessment will probably result in a long list of training needs. Based on an analysis of the data, make your recommendations for specific training programs or interventions.

## Step Five: Provide Feedback

After the data have been collected and analyzed, identify the area(s) of need, design an action plan or strategies, and communicate your conclusions and recommendations to key personnel. This feedback should be delivered in both a written and an oral format. As you prepare to communicate your findings and recommendations, keep in mind that the goal is to get approval for your proposal. Plan a strategy for presenting the information in a positive light. Carefully think through what (and how much) to share, how to share, and with whom to share findings and recommendations.

The Written Report. The final report is a critical piece. It should be constructed in such a way that it presents the data in an easy-to-understand format along with conclusions and recommendations. The length of the final report, of course, depends on how extensive the assessment is. In any case, the written report should contain the following elements:

**Executive Overview.** Provide an overview of your proposal for executives, an abbreviated, concise representation of the larger document, limited to one page and distributed to the key decision makers.

**Description of the Process.** Provide appropriate background information, such as the problem statement or current situation, and briefly describe the entire needs assessment process, including purpose, scope, methods used, and the people involved. Be sure to include your rationale, that is, your reason for conducting a needs assessment.

**Summary of Findings.** In this section, present your data clearly and concisely, highlighting patterns or significant results.

**Preliminary Conclusions.** Address the analysis of the data, focusing on key issues that have surfaced. It may be appropriate to show how the findings relate to or support your (or others') perceptions. Point out how the issues relate to the business need. Do not assume that readers will make the connection by themselves.

**Recommendations.** At this point, list your ideas and recommended solutions to the problem. When identifying training issues, be clear about what programs should be implemented, who should be involved, and how, when, and where the training will take place. Be careful not to lock yourself in by being too specific.

**Potential Barriers.** Solutions to problems are not without problems themselves. Take a proactive approach by addressing potential barriers up-front and suggesting ways to overcome them. Potential barriers can be almost anything, but the most common will probably be cost, time commitment, and the commitment of the target audience and/or their managers.

**Oral Presentation.** In addition to the written proposal, plan to present your information and recommendations to a selected audience. The oral presentation is an opportunity to hear reactions from the key players. Be prepared for questions and challenges. Anticipate what they may be and have responses and answers ready. Look at your presentation as a chance to sell your ideas. That means you will need to fine-tune your persuasion and influencing skills. Ask someone who is a skillful presenter and persuader to coach you before your presentation or, if you have the time and the opportunity, participate in a workshop on persuasive presentations.

**Selected Audience.** Your selected audience depends on a number of factors such as the corporate culture and internal politics. In general, include key decision makers and representative stakeholders such as members of the target audience, their managers, and anyone who may have a vested interest in the program's success. Also, the number of meetings and the levels involved in receiving the feedback should relate to the scope of the assessment. For example, if everyone in the organization completed an employee-opinion survey, then every employee should receive feedback. This is generally done in various group meetings, with the managers sharing the results of the survey along with the appropriate action plan.

**Length.** In many cases, you may have little control over the length of the presentation. Senior management will probably determine the time available based on their schedules, priorities, and other commitments. If they do not, then request an hour. That will give enough time to present your case and address any questions or concerns the executives might raise.

**Format/Approach.** The key here is to present findings in summary form. Use slides or transparencies of bulleted points and simple charts and graphs to illustrate and highlight important information.

## Developing an Action Plan

After presenting the information and making recommendations, solicit reactions and feedback from the key players. It is possible that they will immediately approve your proposal. More likely, however, you will be asked to make some modifications. In some cases, you may have to go back to the drawing board several times.

Once your proposal has been approved, map out a plan for the design, development, and delivery of the program(s). Include specific action items with a time line and appropriate task assignments.

The next step in the process of designing a program that meets the specific developmental needs of the participants and the business needs of the organization is to write learning outcomes or objectives, which are addressed in detail in Chapter 5. However, before you begin the design and development process, examine some critical elements that are often overlooked: how adults learn, the different learning styles of your participants, and your own training style. Finally, examine some of the diversity issues in today's workplace that will have an impact on how you design, develop, and deliver effective training programs. These important considerations will be addressed in Chapters 2, 3, and 4.

## Assessing Participants' Knowledge, Attitudes, Skills

So far, we have looked at the needs-assessment process that serves as the basis of training design, development, and evaluation. It may seem that after you receive the go-ahead to design and develop a program targeted to specific needs, the needs-assessment task is over. Not so! You also must assess the knowledge, attitudes, and skill level of the participants prior to each session. Different audiences may have different needs. For example, let's say the organization has decided to implement a management development program to include all levels of management from first-line supervisor to senior manager level. The needs of a first-line supervisor will be different from those of a mid-level manager, and certainly different from those of a senior manager. Therefore, participants at each level must be further assessed.

### Pre-Session Questionnaire

A short, simple, and straightforward questionnaire such as the one shown in Exhibit 1.3 can be an invaluable tool in fine-tuning your program.

The information you receive from such a questionnaire will help you in the following ways:

1. It can help to design the program at the appropriate level, not insulting participants' intelligence (and boring them to death) by dealing with content they already know. By the same token, you do not want to lose them by talking over their heads.
2. A questionnaire allows you to identify those participants who have greater familiarity with the training topic so you can draw on them as resources.

**EXHIBIT 1.3. Confidential Pre-Session Questionnaire**

## Management Skills and Techniques: Part III

The purpose of this questionnaire is to provide the facilitator of this program with insights into your current skills in or knowledge about the subject of managing others. By knowing what new skills and knowledge you would like from the program, the facilitator will be better able to meet your needs.

Name: ______________________ Current Position: ______________

Organization: _________________ City, State: __________________

Previous positions held:

Formal education beyond high school:

What management courses, workshops, or seminars have you attended?

Briefly describe the responsibilities of your current position:

How long have you managed or supervised others?

How many people do you directly supervise or manage?

What do you believe is the most difficult problem or challenge you face when managing people?

What one specific thing do you want to get out of this program?

What concerns do you have about participating in this learning experience?

Conversely, by identifying those with less familiarity with a topic, you will know who may need additional attention or encouragement.

3. The questionnaire will help to weed out those who do not belong in the session because they are under-qualified, over-qualified, or doing work for which the program is irrelevant. This is particularly important for voluntary, open-enrollment programs advertised to all employees in an organization. Unfortunately, no matter how well the course description identifies the target audience and learning outcomes, invariably those who do not read beyond the title will sign up for programs for which they are not suited. When that happens, take the person aside, explain that the session may not meet his or her expectations, and offer the person the option of leaving. Should the person choose to stay, you have at least been up-front about what the participant can and cannot expect.
4. The questionnaire can be used to gather information to use in creating real-life case studies, skill practices, and examples. The more relevant you can make your material, the more the participants will embrace the training. Of course, assure the participants that their contributions may be used but not identified.
5. The questionnaire can identify potential problems caused by negative attitudes so that you can take steps to overcome these barriers or pockets of resistance.
6. The questionnaire can create a positive learning environment even before the program starts. It can help participants be mentally prepared for the training. Also, your interest in finding out about them even before they come to your session will make them more receptive to you and what you have to offer.

## On-the-Spot Assessment

Regardless of how extensive your needs assessment is, it is also a good idea to conduct an informal, on-the-spot, individual needs assessment at the beginning of the first session. Start by asking the participants what they expect from the session. Their answers will give you an indication of whether or not your design is on target. This on-the-spot assessment will also provide an opportunity to clarify participants' expectations. Reinforce those expectations that are on target with the

## KEY POINTS

- A needs assessment serves as the basis for program development.
- A needs assessment identifies the gap between the actual and desired performance.
- A needs assessment provides criteria for measuring program success.
- Start with an organizational context, that is, the business impact of the training need.
- Use a variety of methods to assess training needs: surveys, interviews, observations, questionnaires, performance data, etc.
- Get input from various sources, including senior management, target population, target population's managers, direct reports, co-workers, customers, vendors, human resources professionals, competitors, and industry experts.
- Follow a prescribed five-step process to identify both the business needs of the organization and the developmental needs of the participants.

training design or make last-minute adjustments to the program, to make sure participants' needs are met. Sometimes, participants may have expectations that you cannot possibly meet in the session. Chapter 8 covers some specific interactive on-the-spot needs assessment activities.

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Once you have completed the needs assessment and developed your action plan, the next step is to design the training program. Before doing so, however, you need to have a clear understanding of how adults learn so that you reflect adult-learning principles throughout your training program.