

Conducting a Needs Assessment for Your Work Group

Before you design a training program, you have to determine the needs it will be expected to meet. A needs assessment, or needs analysis, will help you decide. It helps you identify workplace issues and decide whether training would be an effective way to deal with them.

Needs assessment is usually the first in a series of steps implemented to encourage effective change. It forms the basis for choosing actions and designing programs. The steps involved include: (1) listing workplace issues that are problematic or that offer some cause for concern; (2) examining how different people perceive workplace issues; (3) examining barriers that may keep group members from reaching their true potential.

Types of Needs Assessment

There are two types of needs assessment. *Problem analysis* identifies a problem and offers solutions. The *competency model* addresses available opportunities by identifying and acquiring new skills and abilities, or competencies. Before you conduct a needs assessment, you must determine which type best fits your situation. This can be accomplished through the following steps:

1. Document the current state of behavior. Compare the current situation at work to the ideal situation. In doing so, you can identify any gaps that training could help close. Examine problem behavior: Is it being caused by inadequate skills or

knowledge, or is absence of a support system for training and retraining employees the culprit?

2. Determine the purpose of the needs assessment. Is it to address a problem or find an opportunity? Clarify whether you are looking at actual problems or merely their symptoms. Investigate with management whether likely solutions will be feasible to implement.

3. Obtain management support. This is critical. Any workplace intervention must have the support of management as the bare minimum. Ideally, however, support should come from all levels. This will ensure a sense of buy-in among the employees.

The Assessment Process

Once you have completed the preliminary steps and determined what sort of assessment you need, you can move on to the process itself. The needs assessment process consists of three stages:

1. Surveillance. Before you begin to gather data, define the issue. A well-defined problem is already half-solved. Check to make sure your perception meshes with that of management. Next, determine the specific actions needed to solve the problem. Solicit input from those who are most involved. Then define the mission: Is training an appropriate intervention? If not, the process ends here. If the answer is yes, the process will continue.

During the surveillance stage

you can use filters, or guideline categories, to collect data that will help form a training program. Filters will help you sort information into different categories, define training needs, and determine who needs training.

2. Investigation. Once you create a focus, you can begin investigating the issues. First, you define the areas within the organization that you will analyze. Second, you collect the data, first establishing broad categories for formulating the data design.

3. Analysis. Sort the incoming information by rigorously examining its validity, rejecting any that proves to be invalid. The information you are now collecting should be put into an initial status report (even if that report is only for the files). Once you have gathered your data, organize it for review. Group the data into three categories: organization, operations, and human resources. During your work group analysis, look for statements of objectives, goals, or mission, as well as organizational and human resource policies. Likewise, during your operations analysis, search for ways to identify job performance standards and break down job components. Finally, during human resource analysis, examine individuals' job performance, measuring current performance levels and evaluating training requirements.

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