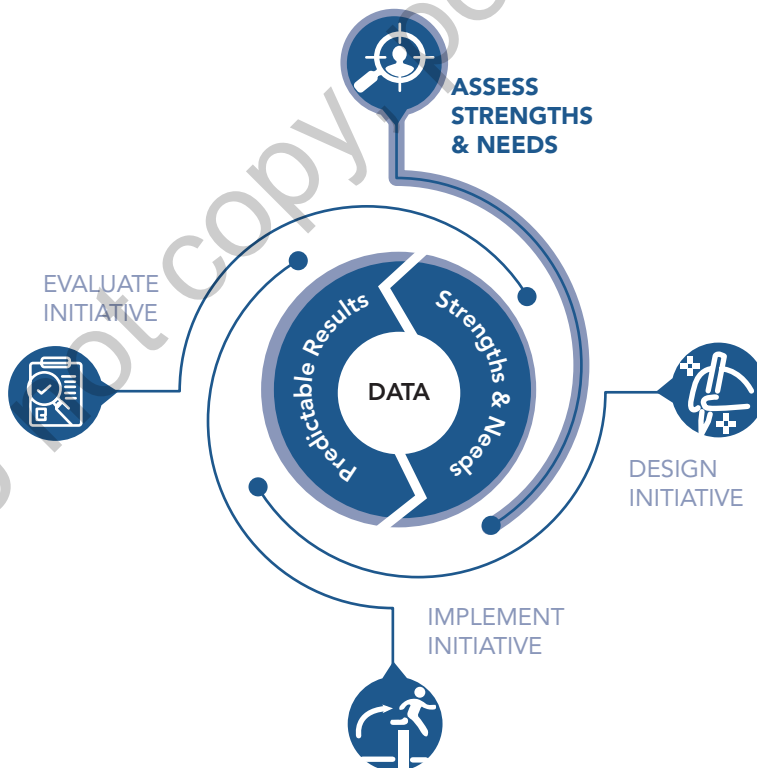# Getting Smart Through Needs Assessment

What would you think, if upon walking into your doctor's office, she took one look at you and handed you a prescription? Unthinkable. And yet, when we launch into initiative design without taking time to understand the people involved, we are blindly prescribing without a proper diagnosis . . .

ASSESS STRENGTHS & NEEDS

EVALUATE INITIATIVE

Predictable Results

Strengths & Needs

DATA

DESIGN INITIATIVE

IMPLEMENT INITIATIVE

In Part I You Will . . .

- Analyze needs based on a defined, optimal outcome

- Categorize the types of strengths and barriers that drive success for people and the organizations in which they work and learn

- Get guidance on collecting data to inform your initiative design

- Review approaches to organizing data, as you draw conclusions that will influence your initiative's design

Key Tools

Tool 1: Realizing the 3Vs

Tool 2: Asking Good Questions

Tool 3: Data Collection Methods to Consider

Tool 4: Needs Assessment Headline Authoring Tool

Self-Assessment: Conducting Needs Assessment

Use this quick self-assessment to help you determine your prior knowledge for topics covered in Part I.

| HOW MUCH DO YOU KNOW ABOUT . . .	A LOT	A LITTLE	NOT AT ALL	UNSURE
• How to assess needs	❍	❍	❍	❍
• Opportunity gaps	❍	❍	❍	❍
• Appreciative inquiry	❍	❍	❍	❍
• Performance drivers for successful initiatives	❍	❍	❍	❍
• When and how to gather quantitative and qualitative data	❍	❍	❍	❍
• The value of assessing needs	❍	❍	❍	❍

Success Starts With Understanding Needs

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As a leader, you have undoubtedly encountered a chain of events that culminates in someone—a coach or consultant for example—sharing a "great idea for a program" or a "we should be doing this!" The simple fact that the current situation isn't how *they feel it should be* suggests the presence of a *gap*. Logic then follows that there are two related factors at play in this situation:

- The way things should be

- The way things currently are

Using basic and familiar deficit modeling, defining the gap is at first glance simple. Consider it like the subtraction problems you encountered in elementary school:

The Way Things Should Be
— The Way Things Currently Are
Gap
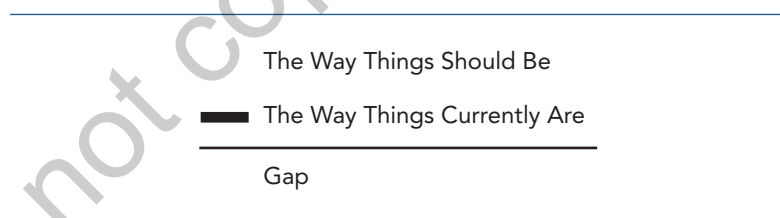
How do we know a gap when we see one? Let's look at some examples:

- Sixty percent of your students' test scores in reading are below standard, while all need to be at or above standard.

- Schools across your district should all have partnerships with local libraries, but only six out of twenty currently do.

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- Teachers should be successfully implementing the new math curriculum in their classrooms, but observations indicate that only five have attempted to do so and only two are implementing based on the program guidelines.

- Students should understand and practice mindfulness techniques each day in class, yet very few can even name the five techniques we have covered.

Each of these examples defines what I consider the **primary gap.** Primary gaps are typically the result of multiple **contributing gaps.** Yet those proposing change often talk at the primary gap level; broad, sweeping strokes about a better reality through elimination of some perceived gap. Their words may sound basic, but we are often persuaded by their simple acknowledgement of a program need and the argument that something must be done. Yet this isn't the ideal place for you to start.

When confronted with such "gap evangelism," I suggest showing interest while planning for inquiry. This type of work almost always involves far more than simply addressing that top-level gap. The primary gap often offers the *call to action*. But designing a successful program will undoubtedly require a more *nuanced understanding of the contributing gaps that, together, define the entire situation—or system.* Yes, system. That's what you'll uncover as you examine all levels of gaps and come to understand how everything fits together to bring about the situation as currently presented. Forewarning: The system you'll uncover is usually messy; it is often political too.

Where We're Headed

Defined gaps, followed by an understanding of the barriers and strengths that allow those gaps to exist, inform the design or selection of programs that improve the gaps. This process is essentially making sure the square-pegged hole is filled with an equally square-pegged program.

When initiatives are predicated on solid data that reflect the voice, views, and visions of those involved, the chance of **predictable results** increases; **equitable results** too.

While the concept of gaps and the process of doing gap analysis may seem straightforward, success requires some unique skills and involves some specific steps I've begun to describe. Before you get too far and in

the interest of offering a balanced perspective on program design and evaluation, let's contemplate a fact about **gap analysis** that few would bother bringing up.

Balancing the Deficit Focus Gaps Involve

In practice, you will find that the parlance used for gaps can vary. Here are some common ways people chat about them:

- Ideal state versus current state

- Wants versus haves

- Optimals versus actuals

- Oughts rather than ares

In the end, each pair represents the same type of equation and definition of the difference—and, let's admit, sometimes it's an intimidating chasm—between where we are now and where we need to be.

This routine is familiar because we have been encouraged to think in gaps most of our lives.

- To graduate, I must take each class on the provided program of study; thus far, I've completed twenty-two out of sixty.

- The job I want requires these qualifications, and I only meet half of those listed.

- I need $20,000 to buy a car, but my current savings is only $15,000.

What do these examples make you feel? If you're feeling less than enthused, there's good reason. They're all about what *isn't* and almost never involve what *is*.

Gap analysis is, by definition, a deficit approach. But that doesn't mean it can't and shouldn't be approached with some appreciative balance. Figure 1.1 uses a "crossing the river" analogy to demonstrate this important point. When all you see is the rushing river standing between where you are and where you need to be, you can become fixated on what you do not have. By widening your view and embracing all that surrounds that primary rushing river gap, you gain the bigger picture, which likely includes things that will support your effort to close the gap.

Figure 1.1   Balanced Approach to Gap Analysis

SEEING ONLY THE GAP:
DEFICIT FOCUS

TAKING TIME TO GET SMART:
GAPS AND STRENGTHS FOCUS
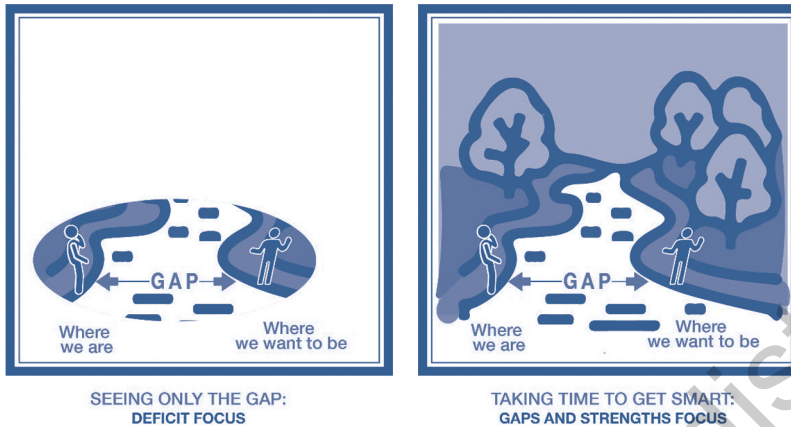
Appreciative Inquiry

Appreciative inquiry is a strengths-based approach based on the belief that deficit-based thinking stands to amplify problems in organizations rather than reduce them. Appreciative inquiry advocates look for the best in what currently is, while also defining the possible—what "could be"—in tangible terms.

Originally conceived by Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987), authors have more recently reflected upon the model and its use. In a comparison of appreciative inquiry to the more traditional approach to challenges, they suggested that traditional tactics treat organizations as *problems to be solved,* while appreciative inquiry approaches the organization as a *mystery to be embraced* (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2001). I ask you, who doesn't love a bit of mystery to keep things interesting?

With attention to the intersection between gap analysis and appreciative inquiry, our pursuits to understand a situation can go beyond deficits. Instead, the focus is to investigate gaps by looking for and seeking to understand areas where performance is falling short as well as areas of strength that can be leveraged in support of reaching the envisioned ideal. As I said earlier, this is the "things going right" approach.

It's important to acknowledge why people's knee-jerk reaction is to reject the positive. Maybe you've heard or even thought some of the following: "Focusing on what we're already doing isn't going to solve the problem." "Building on strengths is such a weak way to look at this, you've gotta focus on the problem to solve it." "Good luck with that warm

and fuzzy thinking, it's not going to change anything." I could, can, and do counter each of these objections to a balanced approach—both to needs assessment and program evaluation. When my efforts involve a balanced approach that is dedicated to surfacing deficits alongside strengths and possibilities, I typically see improvements in the work, the trust, and the motivation of the project teams. It only makes sense when you consider, among other things, the hope that recognizing strengths provides—as opposed to stopping short once deficits are defined.

As leaders, I'd like you to consider this fact: When people shoot down the practice of embracing an appreciative balance to the work, it will tell you something about them, their organizational culture, or both. It might reflect their on-the-job existence is overly ruled by fixing gaps, with limited opportunity for strategy.

Here's another interesting thing about **countering objectives** to appreciative inquiry: While these criticisms are occasionally heard on the front end, I have *never* had anyone criticize the integration of strengths when I am presenting needs analysis results and initiative-related recommendations. In fact, pointing out strengths in the presence of barriers seems to put oxygen back into the room!