



*World-class
evaluation &
organisational
consulting*

Theory-based needs assessment

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Overview

- The two main uses of needs assessment
- A 3-step approach to theory-based needs assessment:
 - Identify the main presenting need
 - Identify the underlying causes of that need, build a needs-based program theory
 - Document the nature and extent of needs and their causes (baseline data, or outcomes)
- Using a needs-based logic model as a framework for evaluation

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The two main uses of NA

- Needs assessment (NA) can be used for two main purposes:
 - Program / intervention / product design (designing something that will address the true needs of the target population)
 - Evaluation of an existing program / product / intervention (identifying baseline & outcome criteria – the needs that are / should be met)

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A 3-step approach to T-B NA

1. Identify the primary presenting need(s) in an existing population
2. Identify the main causes underlying those needs
 - This process draws on existing theory, research and local knowledge
 - The end product is a needs-based program theory that can be used for evaluation
3. Determine the nature and extent of the presenting needs & their causes (i.e., baseline/outcome data)

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Step 1: Identify presenting needs

- Start with the primary unmet need – the reason why the program/intervention/product was considered necessary in the first place

- This may be, for example:
 - A problem (e.g., problematic behavior)
 - A change in circumstances (e.g., a new job) that requires different skills or knowledge
 - Unrealized potential

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Important distinction: Needs vs. wants

- The primary purpose of any intervention is (or should be!) to address the needs of a specific group of individuals and/or organizations

- Needs vs. wants
 - Need = “something without which unsatisfactory functioning occurs”
 - Want = “something consciously desired, and without which dissatisfaction occurs”

- Therefore, most outcomes should relate to needs (i.e., improved functioning in that context)

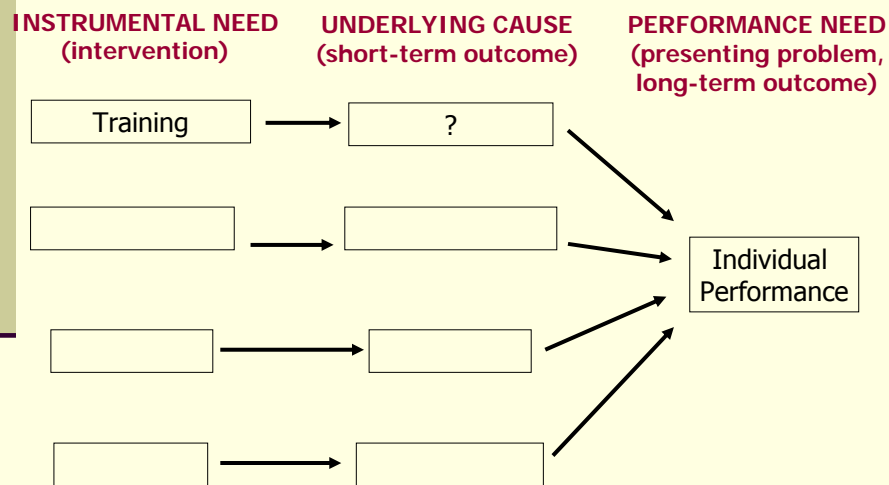
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Step 2: Identify underlying causes

- The right intervention to address the need depends on what caused it!
 - Part of the evaluator's job is to question whether an intervention was the right one in the first place
- Key goal:
 - Avoid making logical leaps from problem to solution
- Important distinction:
 - Performance needs vs. instrumental needs

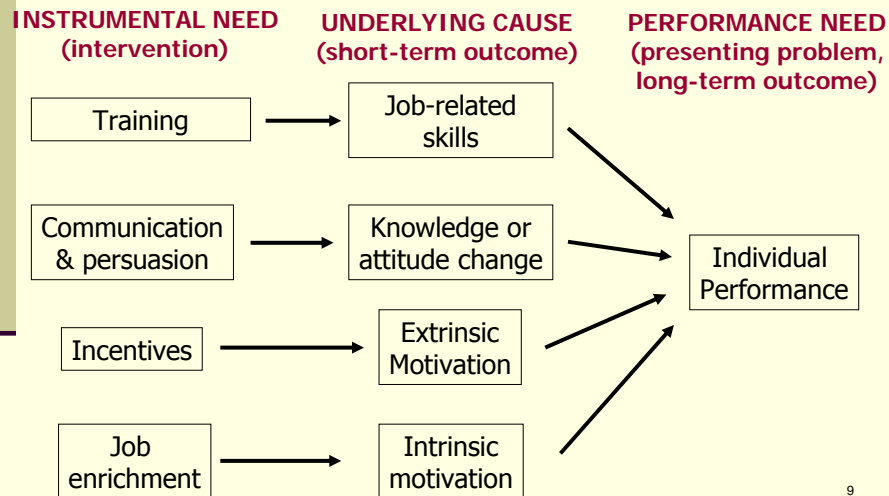
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Performance vs. instrumental needs



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Performance vs. instrumental needs



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Performance vs. instrumental needs

- Performance needs
 - “We need this level of functioning/performance”
 - Performance needs are outcomes
- Instrumental needs
 - “We need Intervention X in order to achieve that”
 - Instrumental needs are parts of the intervention
- You can use this distinction to:
 - Prevent or identify logical leaps
 - Question underlying assumptions
 - Check that all the important causes are being addressed (not just the most obvious one)

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Using program theory to map needs

- Start with the “presenting need” (problem, need for new skills/knowledge/etc, or unrealized potential)
- Identify possible causes (e.g., from the literature); investigate to find which are important in this case (causal tracing methods)
- Also investigate any relevant strengths that may affect the success of the program
- Map all information onto a logic model
- Use the logic model as a ‘road map’ to plan documentation of needs and outcomes

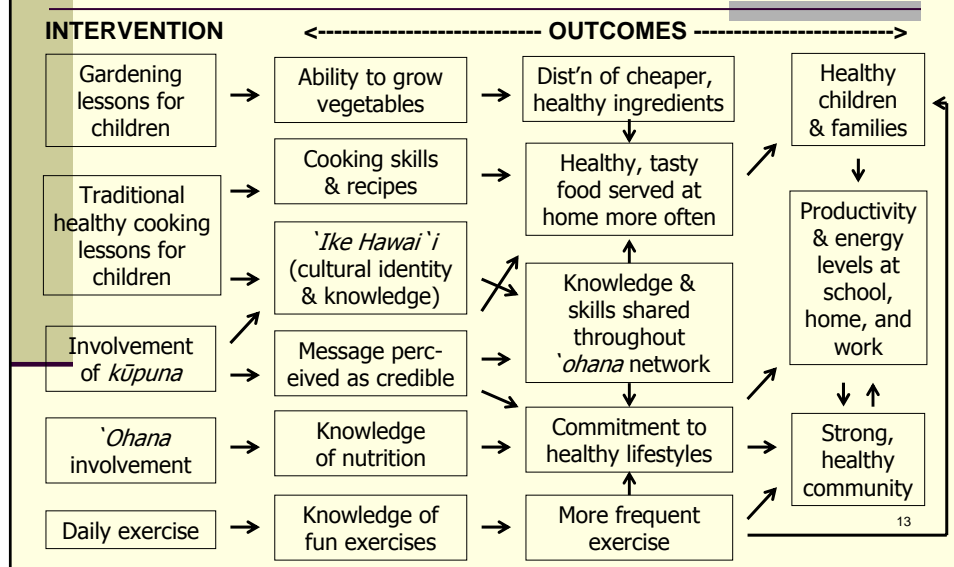
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Ex: Community nutrition program

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|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Vision/needs<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Well nourished/healthy Native Hawaiian families & communities■ Causes of unmet need<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Healthy ingredients unavailable or expensive■ Perception that healthy = not tasty■ Lack of knowledge about nutrition | <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Important strengths<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Extensive <i>`ohana</i> (extended family) networks■ Respect for <i>kūpuna</i> (elders) and for tradition■ Tradition of meeting and exchanging ideas in the context of a meal |
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Logic model for nutrition program



Step 3: Nature & extent of needs

- This step in the needs assessment is used to
 - Unpack each need and understand its contents
 - Generate baseline data (early on) or outcome data (while a program is in progress or after completion)
- The needs assessment should cover:
 - Conscious and unconscious needs
 - Met needs (examples of where people are doing well) and unmet needs (examples of where people are struggling or not reaching their full potential)
- Needs assessment is more difficult than simply asking people what they need!

Unpacking each need in the logic model

- The goal here is to identify what good performance/knowledge/skill looks like, and what the main gaps are when it is poor
- E.g., for knowledge of nutrition:

	Conscious needs	Unconscious needs
Met needs	Ask families who are known to eat healthily what they (both adults and children) know about nutrition and how they plan their diets	Have a dietician identify the major food groups and types of nutrients present in the diet of healthy eating families in the community
Unmet needs	Ask families who do not yet eat much healthy food what they know (specifically) about the food value in their current diet vs. other foods	Have a dietician evaluate the nutritional content in the diet of a non-healthy eating family; identify where the poor food choices are occurring

Generate baseline or outcome data

- Open-ended exploration of met/unmet, conscious/unconscious needs unpacks the “construct” underlying each need/outcome
- The next step is to evaluate current levels of functioning on each need/outcome, which gives us:
 - Baseline data (if the program is brand new, not yet implemented, or not yet designed)
 - Outcome data (if the program is up and running and the timeframe is right)
- Evaluating (not just describing) current levels of functioning = saying something explicit about how well the target populations are functioning on each dimension (not just presenting the numbers and/or descriptions) – that’s an evaluative baseline

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Logic models as evaluation ‘road maps’

- The ‘Outcomes’ columns can be unpacked for outcome evaluation:
 - How substantial or valuable was the progress made on meeting each need?
 - [We can think of the causes as ‘upstream needs’ or ‘intermediate outcomes’]
- The ‘Intervention’ column can be used to build a list of criteria for process evaluation, e.g., for the gardening lessons:
 - Extent to which they cover all necessary skills
 - Level-appropriateness for children
 - Consistent with good and safe gardening
 - Enjoyable and interesting

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Logic models for evaluation planning

- The logic model can also be used to plan what to look at at different points in program maturity
 - Process evaluation can be very useful early on to smooth out implementation glitches; later evaluations should also look at process
 - The first column of outcomes (often knowledge, skill, or attitude change) can typically be assessed quite soon after completion of the program
 - The second column of outcomes might be detectable a few weeks or months later
 - Long-term outcomes (the right-hand column) might be expected to emerge several months to years later

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Reflections

- Program theory is:
 - Primarily used for the evaluation of existing programs
 - Often based on stakeholder theory, and sometimes also on the literature

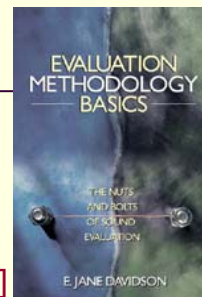
- But there is huge potential in:
 - Improving the robustness of program theory by basing it on sound needs assessment
 - Using program theory as a tool to trace causes and identify upstream needs (i.e., intermediate outcomes)
 - Using a reality-grounded program theory as a tool for causal inference – are the changes really “outcomes”?

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Some useful references

- Davidson, E. J. (2004). *Evaluation methodology basics: The nuts and bolts of sound evaluation*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
[See the Sage exhibit at the conference]

- Davidson, Howe, & Scriven (2004). Evaluative thinking for grantees. In Braverman, Slater, & Constantine (Eds.), *Foundations and evaluation: Contexts and practices for effective philanthropy*. Jossey-Bass.
[See the Jossey-Bass exhibit at the conference]



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