

WHY NEEDS ANALYSIS IS ESSENTIAL FOR EFFECTIVE LEARNING PROGRAMS

Excerpted from materials produced for InSync Training learning evaluation program

Focusing on the Right Thing: Identify Need

Once your performance objectives and business needs are in sync, you have to identify business needs to determine the type of learning necessary to address them.

Figuring out what to focus on in a learning program is top priority. What you target drives performance objectives, sets measurable outcomes, and ideally, enhances business operations post learning.

The third article in the Learning Effectiveness Evaluation Program explores how to identify performance gaps and improvement areas and why this is a must in effective, change-oriented learning.

The Pitfalls of Not Knowing the Learning Needs

If you don't know why the learning program needs to happen, it's really tough to pinpoint its purpose. Without context, the event can ultimately be viewed as a time killer or a wasted budget line.

Karl Bater, managing director at Site Safety Training, told InSync that he's had his share of impractical learning programs. "I've taught many courses over the years," says Bater. "And I like to think I taught them well with good results, only to know deep down the entire program was a waste of time."

Bater offers very sage guidance. "Clearly and fully understand the aims and objectives of the lesson. Teaching someone to do something and then evaluating what you have taught through whatever means are pointless exercises if what you taught was not what was needed."

This advice puts in mind Alice in Wonderland who, after wandering around a bit, runs into the Cheshire Cat and asks: "Would you please tell me where I go from here?" And that cat (in learning design brilliance, if you will) answers: "That depends a good deal on where you want to get to."

So it goes for your learning program. If you are not quite sure where it's headed, it might have a few pitfalls, like the following situations. Maybe some are familiar to you?

- Everyone in the company is required to participate in the same learning program, regardless of their roles and expertise.
- A department head asks the learning and development (L&D) team to design a learning program around an innovation he or she believes will really turn things around.
- The learning program addresses a perceived need, when, actually, the real need is quite different (or there is no need at all!).
- Employees participating in the learning program don't understand why they are there (especially if they already "know this stuff").
- The company president calls for a series of learning events in order to spend down the L&D budget.
- Not much is actually applied after the learning event is finished.

These situations don't give much credence to L&D benefits nor to your learning design savvy and experience.

The Needs Analysis: A Must Have

If the performance objectives and business needs are tied together, then you're primed to conduct a needs analysis, a report that recommends what type of learning is required, who should participate in that learning, and how it should be delivered. (And yes, it frames the must-have evaluation component.)

The needs analysis helps to structure an appropriate learning strategy by helping you to:

- Identify performance gaps
- Decide who would benefit from a learning program
- Focus on the "right" knowledge and skills
- Set performance objectives
- Design an appropriate evaluation
- Develop a learning plan and relevant content
- Direct resources to priority areas
- See where existing learning programs can be beefed up
- Determine whether a learning event is necessary

One Important Caveat:

A needs analysis follows an organizational needs assessment, which highlights performance gaps and growth areas. Assessment data are what inform relevant learning programs. If your organization has already done a needs assessment, excellent. If not, then L&D, along with business leadership and other stakeholders, should be thinking about implementing that process.

As the Learning Effectiveness Evaluation Program continues, you will learn how to draw on assessment data to conduct a needs analysis. Right now — seeing its potential impact on your learning initiatives — you should be pretty psyched up about getting a jump on the process.

Not Just Going Somewhere

Let's revisit Alice in Wonderland, who tells the Cheshire Cat that she actually doesn't care much where she goes ... as long as she gets somewhere.

That's NOT what you want to happen in a learning program. It can't just take learners to a place out of context. It has to be constructed with clear goals and results. It needs to be a part of the solutions to organizational challenges. Or, even better, a vehicle for supporting areas in need of improvement.

With a clear understanding of identified needs, and determining which of those can be best addressed through a mindfully crafted learning program, all stakeholders benefit from improved skills, greater productivity, and (very important) a renewed appreciation for L&D.

Topic 2 articles will further highlight the value of a needs analysis, and its connection to alignment and evaluation, guiding you as focus on and begin to construct performance objectives, which, by the way, get you past "somewhere" to a concrete learning destination.