AN INTERVIEW WITH ROGER KAUFMAN AND INGRID GUERRA-LOPEZ: ABOUT NEEDS ASSESSMENT FOR ORGANIZATIONAL SUCCESS[*]

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Ingrid Guerra-López, PhD, is an associate professor and director of the Institute for Learning and Performance Improvement at Wayne State University, and Principal of Intelligence Gathering Systems. She has served on the board of directors of the International Society for Performance Improvement (ISPI), and is Editor of ISPI's research journal Performance Improvement Quarterly. Dr. Guerra-López's research, consulting and teaching focus on improving human and organizational performance through needs assessment and evaluation, with particular focus on the identification and mapping of performance indicators. She has published six books and approximately 50 articles. Her latest co-authored book with Roger Kaufman, Needs Assessment for Organizational Success has become an American Society for Training and Development (ASTD) best-seller. Her book, Performance Evaluation: Proven Approaches for Improving Program and Organizational Performance is one of the most widely used evaluation books in instructional systems and performance improvement graduate programs.

Roger Kaufman is professor emeritus, Florida State University, Director of Roger Kaufman & Associates, and Distinguished Research Professor at the Sonora Institute of Technology (Mexico). He received ASTD's Distinguished Contribution to Workplace Learning and Performance award. Also, he is a past president, honorary member for life and Thomas Gilbert Award winner, all with ISPI, Kaufman has published 41 books and over 280 articles on strategic planning, performance improvement, quality management and continual improvement, needs assessment, management, and evaluation. He consults world-wide with public, private and NGO organizations. At Florida State he created the Center for Needs Assessment and Planning that did applied research and development. The literature often sites him as "the father of needs assessment." He is a Fellow of the American Psychological Association and the American Educational Research Association.

Shaughnessy:

First of all, why a book on needs assessment? What seems to be missing out there in the field?

Roger Kaufman:

Most books are good but not complete. And most are really dealing with tactical planning and assume that the organization's mission is correct such as rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic. This book includes needs assessment at the individual performance

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level (Micro), the organizational contributions level (Macro) as well as at the external client and societal level (Mega) which is what is missing from conventional approaches. And it also talks to quasi-needs assessments such as training needs assessment. We show how to not only collect valid data at all levels but how to assure that each level links and integrates.

Shaughnessy:
You often seem to reiterate- needs are not wants, and means are not ends- why this phrase? And why so repeatedly?
Roger Kaufman:
When one use "need" as a verb they are cutting down their options and starting with solutions. Needs are gaps in results, wants are preferred ways to close those gaps. Starting with a means, such as training, is a sure-fire way to fail.

Shaughnessy:
What are some of the basic tools for a useful assessment?
Roger Kaufman:
First, an open mind, then, as we show in the book, the basics are to identify and verify gaps in results at three levels of results. There are a number of techniques for harvesting needs that vary from demographic data to questionnaires.
Ingrid Guerra-López:
First and foremost, figure out what questions we want answers to and for what purpose. That clarifies what data are relevant. We should never look for the data first, as that can lead us to potentially irrelevant data that distorts, or limits, our view of reality.

Shaughnessy:
Now, at the Macro level- what are the big issues?
Roger Kaufman:
The biggest issue is to make sure that this level is based on needs at the Mega level. Otherwise you will be defining solutions to no known problems.
Ingrid Guerra-López:
Macro is all about organizational results but for them to be sustainable, they must be aligned to Mega-level results.

Shaughnessy:
Going to the Micro level now- what are the issues of critical importance there that are often overlooked?
Roger Kaufman:
To make sure that, results at this level will add value to the organization as well as to external clients and our shared society.
Ingrid Guerra-López:
A typical mistake here is to have a myopic view of human performance, at the expense of organizational performance and external contribution. For example, we can make sure we have competent people, but if they're accomplishments are not aligned to worthy functions, organizational results, and external contributions, once again, we will not be able to have any sustainable success. The house of cards will come down sooner or later.

Shaughnessy:
What is a "quasi needs" assessment?
Roger Kaufman:

These are gaps in desired solutions, such as training, staff development, team-building and the like

Ingrid Guerra-López:

Because conventional wisdom is to focus on solutions at the expense of first identifying gaps in results, this is where many people start, and why so many interventions fail. At best the quasi needs assessment focuses on how to best design solutions for a particular group, but misses the fact that this solution should likely not be implemented at all. As Roger Kaufman notes earlier, to start here is about as useful as rearranging the chairs in the Titanic.

Shaughnessy:

Let's talk about recommendations---do you differentiate between recommendations that are viable, feasible and doable- and those that are really REQUIRED, but pie in the sky?

Roger Kaufman:

That is why we want to build on actual data, not fantasies and existing biases. If the data are there, then it isn't pie in the sky.

Ingrid Guerra-López:

This reminds me of the expression "low hanging fruit"...it makes me cringe every time I hear it. It sends the erroneous message that we should do easy things first, when in fact, the data might say something to the contrary. Sometimes, it is the most difficult things that must be done first, or nothing else will matter. Feasible, doable, and viable, are important considerations, but keep in mind that at some point, someone believed that a "round world" didn't seem feasible, doable, and viable.

Shaughnessy:

How do you go about linking needs assessment to the on-going evaluation issues- and what ARE the evaluation issues?

Roger Kaufman:

Needs assessment defines gaps in results and prioritizes them on the basis of the cost to meet the need as compared to the costs to ignore the need. Evaluation uses that same gaps data base and determines the extent to which the needs have been met...closed.

Ingrid Guerra-López:

In addition, needs assessments allow your evaluation to be more proactive, as they give you the basis for continuous motioning, so that improvement can be continuous and timely.

Shaughnessy:

What is a "performance dashboard" and how important is it in the big scheme of things?

Roger Kaufman:

These are management tools so you can track your progress in meeting needs at each defined level of performance. It is important to use as the gauges on your car's dashboard.

Ingrid Guerra-López:

It is also worth noting that having a dashboard will not automatically result in improved performance, it is critical to track the right metrics at the right times, and provide the right type of feedback to those responsible for improving performance. A needs assessment sets the stage for a useful performance dashboard.

Shaughnessy:

Give us a few gap assessment tools and why they are required. For example, existing data, questionnaires, interviews....

Roger Kaufman:

Our "The Assessment Book".

Ingrid Guerra-López:

Gaps can be assessed with just about any data collection tool used in other inquiry-based processes. The key is to use the right tool for the data you seek. You have to understand what data you seek and why before you're in the position to select appropriate data collection tools.

Shaughnessy:

What have I neglected to ask about this realm?

Roger Kaufman:

Nothing, doing a good need assessment is practical, pragmatic, and ethical.

Ingrid Guerra-López:

Moreover, the costs associated with not conducting a needs assessment will almost always be higher than conducting one.