

# 2

## A Synthesis of Needs Assessment and Asset/ Capacity Building

### BASIC DEFINITIONS

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*Need* is a noun, “a problem that should be attended to or resolved” (Altschuld & Kumar, 2010, p. 3). It is a gap or discrepancy between the “what should be” and “what is” conditions, and *needs assessment* is the process of identifying needs (discrepancies), prioritizing them, making needs-based decisions, allocating resources, and implementing actions in organizations to resolve problems underlying the important needs (Altschuld & Kumar, 2010, p. 20).

Asset/capacity building (A/CB) refers to building a culture in an organization or a community so that it can grow and change in accord with its strengths and assets as related to its future. Specifically, A/CB is the identification of the array of assets (organization, community, agency, fiscal, skills of individual people) available or potentially available to a group, and the application of what has been so ascertained to improve the group in a positive way.

## **A COMPARISON OF NEEDS ASSESSMENT AND ASSET/CAPACITY BUILDING**

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In Table 2.1 needs assessment and asset/capacity building are compared to demonstrate their relationships and uniqueness on dimensions such as

- vision;
- premise (the thought pattern of those conducting the effort or facilitating it);
- role of external individuals (driving force, participant, etc.), with several entries dependent on where things are in a process;
- context for the work;
- how the work might begin;
- methodology mix;
- who or what groups are involved in obtaining data;
- from whom the data are collected;
- use of results;
- time frame for the endeavor, noting that it is dependent on the context and issues of concern;
- collaboration and/or cooperation required for activities to be successful; and
- other parts of the work.

The simplest way to draw distinctions would be in terms of extremes, and if one is an absolute devotee of one of the camps that would be reasonable, but for the author that is not meaningful. The premise is that there is a trend toward hybrid usage, and explanations within the table reflect that view. The dimensions are in the middle (they are the rows of the table) with asset/capacity building and needs assessment being on the left and right, respectively.

Many of the entries in the table are straightforward and require slight amplification whereas others are not black-and-white contrasts. Philosophical distinctions are made as in rows 1 and 2 (vision and premise of the activity), although in practice there are a lot of similarities between the two endeavors. In rows 3 and 4 (roles of external individuals at the

**Table 2.1** Comparing and Contrasting Asset/Capacity Building and Needs Assessment

<i>Asset/Capacity Building</i>	<i>Dimension</i>	<i>Needs Assessment</i>
<p>Some of the individuals involved have a sense of what might be a better future or what should be.</p> <p>This might arise over time, but the idea is present even if vague at the beginning.</p>	<p>1. Vision</p>	<p>The “what should be” state is like vision although it usually isn’t referred to in that way.</p> <p>When the NA is about the long-term future, there is much overlap with A/CB.</p>
<p>Begins with assets and strengths as the way to go and comes from a can-do, self-reliant attitude.</p> <p>Does not start with needs or gaps as they are negative thinking.</p>	<p>2. Premise of the activity</p>	<p>Kicks off with a focus that needs (discrepancies, gaps in performance) are prioritized as the basis for action.</p> <p>Resources (assets) come into play later in the process.</p> <p>Starts with identifying the “what should be” and “what is” conditions and gaps between them.</p>
<p>Facilitators are catalysts for the community or organization and help whomever they are working with to find their own direction for capitalizing on assets and strengths.</p> <p>Assumes that communities and groups are ready to lead the endeavor, and in some instances externals may have to exercise more leadership.</p>	<p>3. Role of external individuals at the beginning of the endeavor</p>	<p>Probably early on NA is more externally directed and led. It may be that the external person or group narrows the focus and direction of what is to be studied.</p> <p>The above was true 10–15 years ago, but now the organization or agency is more involved at the onset via a needs assessment committee (NAC), which makes more decisions about focus.</p> <p>Needs assessors still are more directive than their asset/capacity-building counterparts.</p>

(Continued)

**Table 2.1 (Continued)**

<i>Asset/Capacity Building</i>	<i>Dimension</i>	<i>Needs Assessment</i>
<p>The involvement would be continuous, but from a “Rogerian” stance the individuals and groups are in control and will find their path toward change and improvement.</p> <p>The catalyst is the same throughout the entire process.</p>	<p>4. Role of external individuals as the endeavor progresses</p>	<p>What the needs assessor does changes as the NA gets into prioritization of needs, selection, and implementation of solution strategies—more local aegis then becomes apparent.</p> <p>The needs assessor during the latter stages of the process becomes more of an advisor with the control being in the organization or agency.</p> <p>Over the course of the assessment ownership becomes the province of those in the organization.</p>
<p>A/CB occurs often in community settings such as health care, public health, and community development.</p> <p>The ideas generalize if one thinks of an agency or a business as a small community.</p>	<p>5. Context for the work</p>	<p>NAs seem to be done in agencies, organizations, institutions, businesses, and companies.</p> <p>The context is usually narrower and somewhat less complex than working in communities.</p>
<p>A/CB and NA may be very similar with regard to initiating factors.</p> <p>Some groups or individuals in a community have a sense that change is required.</p> <p>The focus may be due to the hierarchy although this is usually less so than in NA.</p>	<p>6. How the work might begin</p>	<p>NA and A/CB often commence in the same way, but here it tends to be in response to problems.</p> <p>One difference may be that the impetus initially may come from the administrative level.</p>

<i>Asset/Capacity Building</i>	<i>Dimension</i>	<i>Needs Assessment</i>
<p>Heavy reliance on the use of qualitative methods such as interviews, observations, and focus groups.</p> <p>Some studies are mixed in method, but qualitative methods seem to predominate.</p> <p>Doesn't get much into causal analysis or prioritization strategies.</p>	<p>7. Methodology mix</p>	<p>Surveys and database analyses were noticeable in the past and are still used extensively, but multiple methodology is emphasized more now.</p> <p>More variety of methods than A/CB including causal analysis and prioritization.</p>
<p>The community or group has to be fully committed to the endeavor and may define what data are collected and may even do the data collection.</p> <p>Other data might be used, but the emphasis is as just described.</p>	<p>8. Who is or what groups are involved in data collection?</p>	<p>As the NA gets off the ground, the needs assessor usually does more of this.</p> <p>If an NAC is involved, it has a major effect on what issues are looked at, what sources and people are considered key, and so forth.</p>
<p>Primarily the community and groups, even including the nature of the physical environment.</p> <p>Other sources may be used and are important, but the stress is as above.</p>	<p>9. From what individuals or groups are data obtained?</p>	<p>NA collects data from 3 levels, direct recipients of services, providers of services (teachers, health workers, etc.), and the management of an organization.</p> <p>Data are most often obtained from the first two levels mainly by surveys.</p>
<p>Results inform community discussions about next steps and future directions.</p> <p>The community may be part of the interpretation of the data and is an active decision maker.</p>	<p>10. Use of results</p>	<p>Results lead to identifying the biggest and most important needs (discrepancies), which are prioritized and causally analyzed as to what activities or programs would be undertaken to rectify them.</p>

(Continued)

<b>Table 2.1 (Continued)</b>			
<i>Asset/Capacity Building</i>	<i>Dimension</i>	<i>Needs Assessment</i>	
		<p>The needs assessor with the NAC would usually do the above steps.</p> <p>Less broad group participation is apparent most of the time.</p>	
<p>Time depends on what has been learned and the size of future efforts to be undertaken.</p> <p>Since cooperation and collaboration across community groups are inherent in this process, it is assumed that they will take more time than NA.</p> <p>Time is predicated on whether the community has engaged in similar efforts previously so the learning curve is not so steep.</p>	<p>11. Time frame with understanding that it varies with context and issues of concern</p>	<p>For smaller, less severe needs the estimate to complete the three phases of NA would be perhaps 3 months, not including implementation of solutions.</p> <p>For major and severe needs the time would be longer, and if cooperation or collaboration across groups is required for their resolution, it will escalate.</p> <p>Like A/VCB, communities have differential readiness for NA, so time is variable.</p>	
<p>In enhancing communities, cooperation and collaboration are essential.</p> <p>Collaboration (shared vision, input, and decision making) is more intense than cooperation and mandates trade-offs for organizations and groups.</p>	<p>12. Role of collaboration and/or cooperation required for activities to be successful</p>	<p>There are cooperative and collaborative NAs, so there is overlap with A/VCB.</p> <p>Here, the two camps might be close together.</p>	

beginning and as the endeavor progresses), the facilitator in A/CB is a catalyst, a person who guides but is not controlling or directive. For NA in the past the facilitative aspect was less prominent. With a recent emphasis on forming a needs assessment committee (NAC) and having it integral with decision making and implementation of procedures and solutions, the needs assessor would also have to be a facilitator as a group goes through the three phases of the process. Whether it is a community, an organization, or an agency, when activities move into new programs and services or restructuring existing ones (Phase 3), control is less the domain of the needs assessor. Then the community or group must commit to the entire endeavor, and in that regard A/CB and NA are in a similar middle ground. Modern NA fits this pattern.

For row 5 (context), assessments are predominantly observed in organizations and agencies. A/CB is more difficult because it is across a community, not so much in a bounded space. Yet there are instances where assessing needs will be like the supposedly opposite end of the spectrum as in public health or emergency preparedness. The resources and assets of health care organizations, police and fire departments, and groups with heavy equipment will have to be considered (especially if there is an earthquake with many collapsed buildings), and water and utility companies, charitable organizations that provide assistance, the military and national guard, and others will have to be cataloged as assets. For a large emergency (as on September 11, 2001, in the United States), the complexity of working across a set of providers is apparent.

So the problem that confronts NA in regard to disaster planning, and what might be done from the A/CB perspective, is nearly identical. Analogous thinking occurs when looking at collaborative needs spanning organizations, and that is the reason for the category in Table 2.1. More will be said about that later in the discussion.

One other point here: Can NA continue to look inside and not externally? Do organizations exist within cocoons without taking into account an increasingly complex and interdependent society? The author doesn't think so, but he was more restricted until working with Witkin who apprised him of a vista to which he is now committed (see Altschuld, 2004).

How does a needs assessment or an asset/capacity-building effort begin (row 6)? There is limited research to guide an answer. The entries are an educated guess based upon experience and perception. Usually a few individuals or a small group, possibly even from the hierarchy, senses a problem or has a feeling that change would be good for the community or organization. They are the initiators in NA and A/CB. They might be akin to the early adopters/adapters of an innovation. In 2010, Altschuld and

Eastmond speculated about how a needs assessment gets going (small group concerns, external press, accountability demands, problems that arise, a bottom-up, grassroots emerging body). Somehow there is a sense to do something different and move forward. The level (high or grassroots) may differ, but it is likely that, if investigated, the two processes will be comparable.

As to methodology mix (row 7), a balance is now more common. In 2004, the author made a strong case that needs are not understood from solely quantitative sources such as databases; they are useful but insufficient. Watkins, West Meiers, and Visser (2012) treat both types of data in an equal fashion. Some needs assessors may favor certain methods, but a mixed approach to procedures is being promoted. That could be said, but perhaps to a lesser degree, for A/CB projects. Initial work is more qualitative in feel and includes cataloging of resources and their locations. However, recent articles from the A/CB perspective contain greater usage of quantitative methods including surveys and analyses of existing quantitative data. If the order of what was done was not factored in, it would be difficult to distinguish a needs assessment from capacity building with the proviso that the former are probably more deficient in determining resources. A conclusion is that methods are coalescing and will continue to do so.

Who is involved in data collection (row 8) and who provides data (row 9) would 20 years ago have afforded sharp distinctions. Needs assessors then would have been the prime collectors via surveys, focus group interviews, interviews, and epidemiological or database studies. Other methods were there, but these would have been the main ones for Phases 1 and 2 of assessment. Methods dealing with causality, prioritization, and solution strategies were also employed later in the process. By contrast, in asset/capacity building the community is the major player in regard to methods and data collection, not so much the facilitator.

This picture has changed in the last 15 to 20 years for needs assessment as there has been movement away from the needs assessor directing and controlling the process. If an NAC is active, more of the assessment, the decision making, the questions to pursue, and the collection of data become its province. The external person will be more supportive than was the case previously.

For row 9, the sources are a bit different, but in current practice some asset/capacity-building endeavors are collecting data from groups and sources that are along the lines of a needs assessment (i.e., it is suspected

that the three levels of needs assessment are there for A/CB but perhaps not fully explicated). There is a great deal of overlap in the use of results (row 10) for A/CB and NA: The goal is really identical, to improve the organization or community and see positive change occur. Utilizing results and who makes the ultimate decision of where to go next are dependent on how the situation unfolds. In capacity building, the power should reside in the community or organization based on strengths and resources that have been identified. In NA it would be lodged more in the hands of the assessor, the external consultant, but practice is changing, and it is now more open, particularly in Phase 3, where choices are made as to improvements or new programs to be implemented. Thus decisions in the two approaches possess many of the same characteristics.

It is difficult to compare the two entities on time frames (row 11) since each has its own distinct nuances that make estimating somewhat tenuous. Many needs assessments are of short-term duration whereas building a community requires much longer. One conclusion is that needs assessments tend to be quicker than their counterpart. NAs may be narrower in focus, done within a limited community (an agency or a business), not across so many groups and organizations. Altschuld and Kumar (2010) placed needs assessments into two time categories: short term (a year or less) and long term (three years or more). The complexity of issues to be attacked determines how much would be needed. Although there are long- and short-term needs, it is safe to say that asset/capacity building is lengthier, which is reasonable when row 12 (cooperation and collaboration) is taken into account.

For needs assessment, why should anything but limited attention be directed toward cooperation and collaboration since so often it is done within the boundaries of a prescribed organization or institution? Numerous aspects of the situation are already well known and understood. We don't have to attend so much to the concerns of others and institutions outside of ours. The focus is internal, and the problems and needs are ours, not those of somebody else. Cooperation or collaboration can only add to the headaches!

The view is more inward and in some cases applies well. But in an interdependent society will this lead to effective change and growth, especially for some of the concerns confronting us? Certain contexts demand that cooperation or collaboration occur as the norm, not the exception. Establishing lines in the sand doesn't work as in public health preparedness and the requirements for collaboration it places on all involved parties. Consider Exhibit 2.1.

**Exhibit 2.1** Cases Where Cooperation and Collaboration Will Be Mandatory

Think of public health preparedness in relation to the assets for dealing with catastrophes—epidemics, earthquakes, tsunamis, and terrorist attacks (9/11, the bombings at the Boston Marathon in 2013). Obvious questions include:

Can any single organization or group handle what might occur?

Does any organization have at its disposal the resources to deal with a problem of this magnitude?

A catastrophe presents different types of issues to be resolved, so will one organization by itself be equipped to treat everything?

What kind of organization and service provider cross-coordination must there be for maximizing success?

Does every provider know its assets and strengths and those of other groups so that help will flow smoothly?

In this vein, look at air pollution, water quality, transportation, delivering cost-effective higher education in times of mounting financial difficulties, and so forth. All of these are not solvable without the sharing of resources, energy, and expertise.

For needs assessment there are social and economic issues that press for going beyond the boundaries of one's safe personal and institutional space. What of the asset/capacity building? Cooperation and collaboration are its heart, its inner core. As stressed by Kretzmann and McKnight (1993), the essence is an in-depth assessment of a wide array of resources. What businesses are in the community, and what do they do? What could they contribute to strengthening the community, and how could they be built into what is to be done? What organizations such as clubs or religious groups are there, and what is their potential involvement? Are there areas in which they could complement what the businesses can do?

Bring in educational resources and government ones (community centers, agencies), and the landscape becomes stronger but more complicated. Tie in the skills and abilities of individuals in the community, along with volunteers, and it is clear that asset/capacity building entails forging this mix into a potent force for improvement. Needs assessment and asset/capacity building are alike on this dimension. Without cooperation and collaboration, they would be less or of diminished impact. What does this mean?

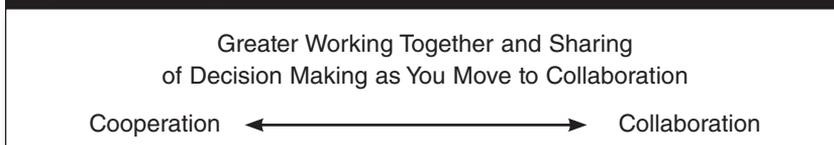
View cooperation and collaboration as being on the ends of a continuum. An assessor or an asset/capacity builder might be conducting a study and would desire your *cooperation* in collecting data and ask for help via questions such as these:

- Could you help in identifying those who have insight and understanding about the community?
- What might be some good ways to get them involved and offering their thoughts?
- Do you have any ideas about questions that might be included?
- What are some of the smaller or unique groups in the community we should have in the study?
- Could you assist us in contacting them and gaining entry into their organizations?
- Your assistance in collecting data would be very much appreciated. Could you help?
- Would you endorse our study and lend the name of your group in support of it?

These are cooperative queries. We value your assistance to do the work, but it is primarily that, cooperation, not collaboration or a low level of it. See Figure 2.1.

Collaboration goes deeper. Cooperation has to be there but ratcheted dramatically up beyond just providing help and assistance. Now the collaborating organization is a full partner as to what the data are about, how the data will be used, what kinds of decisions might be made from the data, what new priorities might be initiated, and so on. Cooperation frequently takes place but full collaboration not so often. Issues come into play. It connotes that a group or an organization give up a measure of control. Compromise is in order with the potential of losing some of a precious commodity, turf. This can be psychologically difficult as a trade-off for ultimately greater, more positive outcomes. It goes counter to the grain of us as persons, and the level of exchange and working together may not be achieved.

**Figure 2.1** Cooperative–Collaborative Continuum



What are other implications of collaboration? In 2010, Altschuld and Eastmond examined the specifics of collaborative needs assessments across institutions and organizations based on needs that are mutual and of high enough interest to each participating entity. Table 2.2 from their work is about the pros and cons of collaboration in needs assessment, and it could be extended to asset/capacity building by simply changing terms. The entries come from students with generally many years of experience in school systems, educational institutions, or social or government agencies who were asked to identify reasons for and against working together. This exercise was repeatedly used with about the same results each time. Interestingly, the positives and negatives were always close to equal.

**Table 2.2** A Sampling of Reasons For and Against Collaborative Needs Assessments

<i>Reasons For</i>	<i>Reasons Against</i>
Shared resources lead to economies of scale for the needs assessment and for actions taken to resolve needs.	Fear of loss of turf or control of same.
Money saved could go to new and/or additional services (more resources).	Unless the setup is perceived to be fair, there could be acrimony.
Better use of staff skills across organizations. Not having to duplicate work.	Limited exposure to working together across entities.
Not operating in a competitive environment.	Sometimes plans developed across entities by committees will not be very good. Negative connotations of a committee product.
Improvement of available services that are poorly done at the present time.	Activities and actions will be difficult to sustain when many parties are involved.
Cross-fertilization of ideas across organizations and groups.	Some groups due to size and other factors will dominate the collective (lack of parity).

<i>Reasons For</i>	<i>Reasons Against</i>
<p>Creating opportunities and even new job possibilities.</p> <p>Collective actions could lead to promising responses to problems.</p>	<p>Eliminations of jobs and reductions in force (job insecurity).</p> <p>If perceived as above, there could be an unwillingness of individuals and groups to give honest and frank input.</p>
<p>Establishing or enhancing channels of communications across organizations and groups (very positive outcome).</p>	<p>Normal competitive spirit will emerge.</p>
<p>New experiences, meeting people, fresh ideas, stimulating growth and change.</p>	<p>Way too much hassle and not worth the effort.</p>

*Source:* Adapted from Altschuld & Eastmond (2010). Used with permission.

The conceptual base for collaboration (and cooperation for that matter) is that we do better joining forces and using assets and resources in a united fashion. That is obvious, but there are powerful forces against doing so. Going from cooperation to collaboration requires ways to ease or reduce negatives. Altschuld and Eastmond (2010) suggested guidelines for achieving collaboration in needs assessment, which are valid for the hybrid framework:

- Given that opposing forces will be encountered, collaboration will take more time. (Frustration will occur, so patience is in order.)
- Protection of turf is a major concern, so take it into consideration when going for collaboration.
- Find ways that different parties and groups can share so that they have an enhanced sense of ownership and commitment.
- Make sure that whatever the groups and individuals are collaborating on is of high importance for all of them.
- It might not be at the top of everyone's list, but it has to be of sufficient value for buy-in, commitment, and action of some sort to improve the situation.
- Collaboration requires coordination to be successful. It doesn't occur spontaneously and might not be sustainable without it.

- What is helpful is for the individual or group leading the effort to have worked previously across organizations in collaborative ventures. What problems did they encounter, how were they resolved, which strategies for resolution worked best and which did not, what did overall success look like, how was it determined, and so on? This type of background will help in smoothing rough spots and building a spirit across involved parties.
- The *criticality* of leadership cannot be overstated for it is at the center of asset/capacity building or of any collaborative needs assessment.
- Keep in mind that when looking at the resources held by not just one organization but many, the door is open for creative problem solving.

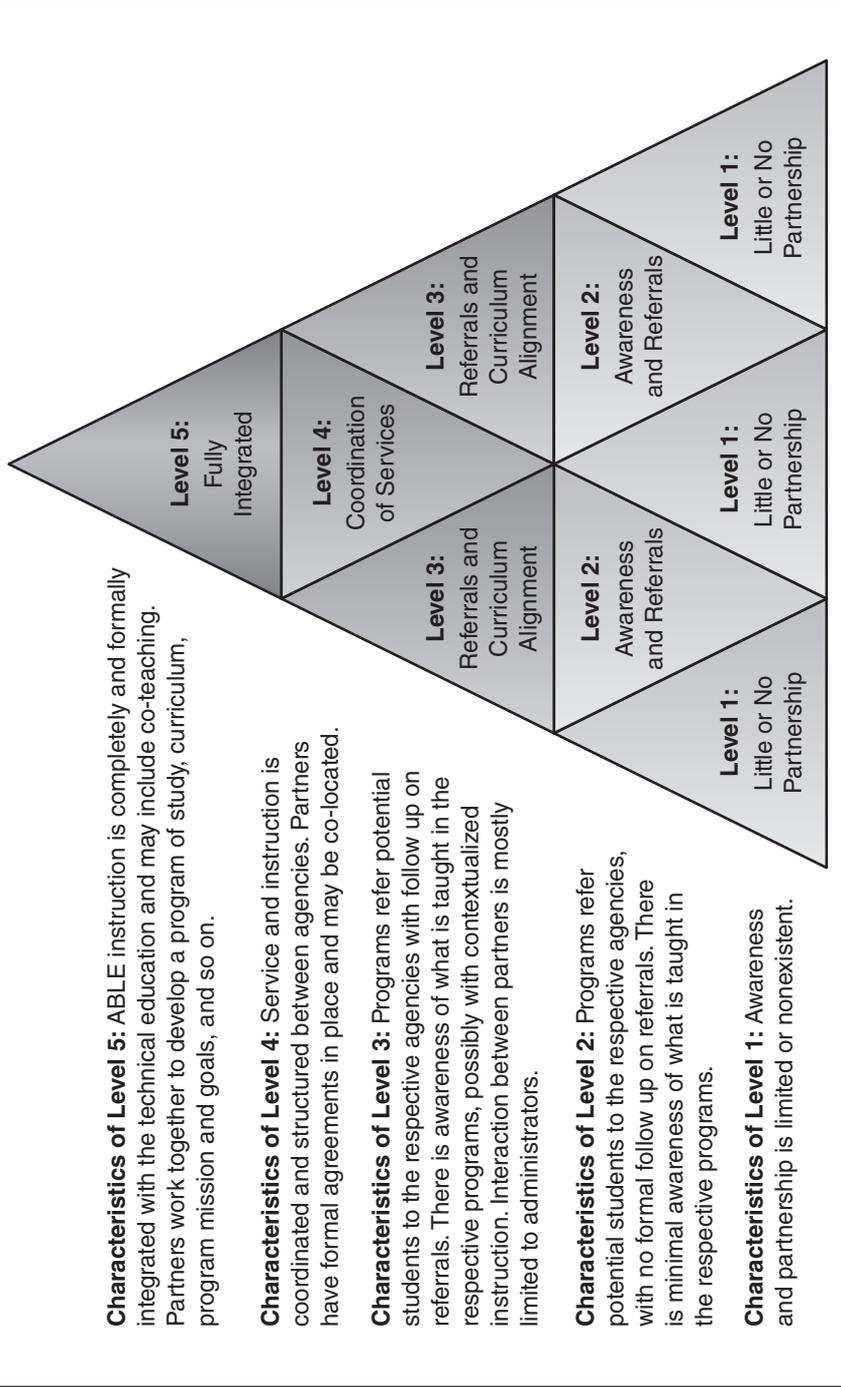
This whole topic is vital to needs assessments and asset/capacity building, and the same will be true for the hybrid framework.

In this vein, it should be noted that in other contexts the concept of collaboration has a slightly different look, and the term that might be used is *partnership*. Lepicki, Glandon, and Mullins (2013) perceived it that way when working with Adult Basic and Literacy Education (ABLE) programs in Ohio. They created the Partnership Evaluation Model with five levels of development to describe partnerships (collaborations in the context of this book). They are in Figure 2.2. What these authors have done is formalized the idea of working together to enhance the delivery of ABLE programs across diverse regions of the state. Similarly, partnering in community involvement in youth development and school success was promoted by the Harvard Family Research Project (2013). For them, there are seven key elements (shared vision of learning, shared leadership and governance, etc.) with many similarities to the ABLE schematic.

The idea of partnering or collaborating underlies a funding program currently in the state of Ohio for innovative ways that local governments could work together to enhance citizen services (Siegel, 2012). The premise is that costs of provision can be significantly reduced across jurisdictions while maintaining quality and service levels. The savings could be as large as 70%. Logistical problems in doing this are to be expected, and the state will assist those who are funded for a smooth transition across groups.

Interestingly, Friedman (2013) has commented about the need for collaborative efforts in government, citing successes in the extremely competitive environment of Silicon Valley. He begins by noting the positive

**Figure 2.2** Partnership Evaluation Model



Source: Lepicki, Glandon, & Mullins (2013). Used with permission.

connotation of the concept and a shrill negative one, being a collaborator as in Nazi-occupied countries in World War II. The positive side occurs where there is a climate for it and where the ultimate good of the client, the consumer, or the culture is foremost for all parties. The observation is insightful, and when we push for working together, groups might be reminded of this important fundamental.

As another example, the mayor of Columbus, Ohio, assembled a coalition of a wide cross section of the community to establish directions for the public schools (Coleman, 2013). This was partly in response to a major crisis but in addition seemed to be motivated by a sincere desire to improve. In a short span of time the group collected much information about the operations of the district, engaged 1,000 citizens in various activities to solicit input, worked to identify new and dynamic leadership to replace the retiring superintendent, and took other first steps to propel positive and meaningful change. The collaborative aspects are noticeable, and the activities of the coalition parallel portions of the hybrid framework that will now be described.

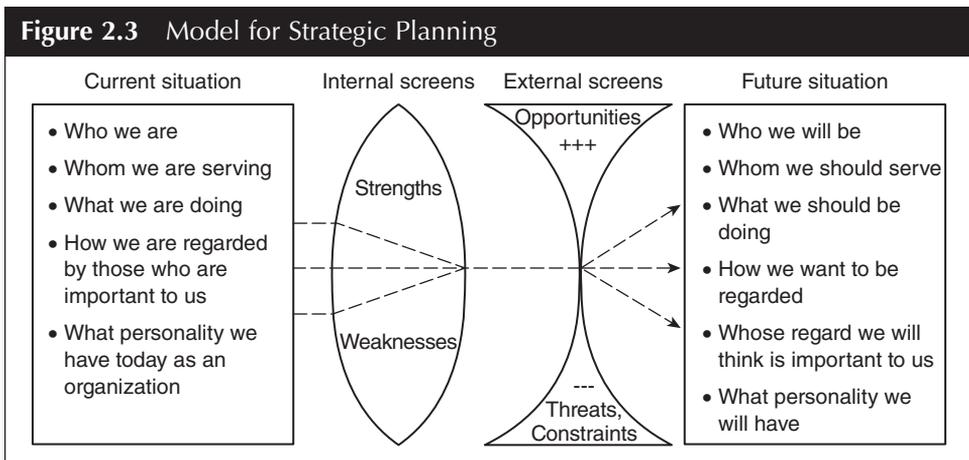
## **DEVELOPING THE HYBRID FRAMEWORK**

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In reviewing literature a number of asset/capacity-building and needs assessment projects were located. The drive behind them was not needs assessment, but needs were not neglected, and resources were at least partly going to be attenuated by them. The two activities were used in tandem to help organizations.

Common patterns popped up frequently across what were thought to be different procedures, processes, models, and frameworks. A consistent theme was there—listening to the voice of the community or organization. It went much further. That voice was prime in terms of what information was collected and seen as important, what were sources of pride and what were concerns, what were the strengths of the community, what were its important components, what might be future possibilities, what would be good things to do, and so forth. Subjects weren't targets but main players in the enterprise. The persons collecting data also were voices in the drama, and the facilitator was catalytic, not controlling. This stance was inherent in empowerment and participatory evaluation and evaluation capacity building. Whether it was from evaluation, asset/capacity building, or collaborative needs assessment is not of concern, but it is the emphasis that matters. The focus is on community and how it is fundamental to improvement and change.

One other strand of thought impacting a hybrid framework is strategic planning (Figure 2.3). Obviously, needs are part of it with the left and right anchors being its two prime elements—“what is” and “what should be.” Between them are internal and external screens (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats—SWOTs) through which the current status is examined in relation to the future situation. Strengths and opportunities are like concepts in asset/capacity building, and weaknesses and threats are closer to needs assessment. The final piece for the hybrid framework comes from the three-phase model of needs assessment expanded by Altschuld and Kumar (2010).



Source: From Witkin & Altschuld (1995), originally from Nutt & Backoff (1992) and used with permission.

## THE HYBRID FRAMEWORK

The hybrid is a prototype, not an absolute. It is to be used, tested, refined, and refined again. It is a framework, not a rigid model, for the intent here, and that is why the softer word fits better—think of it in that light. Table 2.3 contains an overview of it.

The first step doesn't start from a needs or assets/resources stance. The idea is that as communities or organizations raise questions about improvement or where they might be going, they often don't really know or aren't certain as to what might be required and what to do. Watkins and Guerra (2002) observed in needs assessment that when groups originally asked for assistance, they were more into evaluation than assessment.

<i>Step</i>	<i>Purpose</i>	<i>Comments</i>
1. Scoping the context	<p>Probe into the situation by a variety of means to determine what might be the best course to pursue.</p> <p>What emerges—needs assessment, asset/capacity building, or a hybrid?</p>	<p>Whether in needs assessment or asset/capacity building, scoping is essential.</p> <p>Form a working committee to find basic information about the context.</p>
2. Decide on what actions should be taken	<p>Determine what to do:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• nothing,</li> <li>• a needs assessment,</li> <li>• an asset/capacity-building endeavor, or</li> <li>• a hybrid approach.</li> </ul>	<p>Depending on what has been learned, there are numerous possibilities for action.</p> <p>The working committee, not the external person or group, is the key to making the decision.</p>
3. Divide the working group into two subcommittees	<p>Identify resources, strengths, and assets as well as needs at the same time.</p> <p>Subcommittees work independently on needs or assets.</p>	<p>It is important that the charge to each subcommittee is clear.</p> <p>If the overall committee is not large enough for division, start with the asset (positive) side of the equation.</p>
4. Subcommittee(s) <i>independently</i> place key findings in tables or figures	<p>Portray findings and what is being learned into formats that facilitate discussion about how the information can be used.</p>	<p>Tables or simple figures should enable better decision making.</p> <p>Too much information can overwhelm, so strive for simplicity.</p>
5. Subcommittee(s) exchange what has been found and then meet to discuss how to use results	<p>Align the two parts—assets and resources with needs.</p> <p>Come to agreement as to where the assets and capacity aspects could be applied to resolve needs, if there is congruence.</p>	<p>There should be a fairly good understanding of needs and assets, generated separately and arrayed to promote discourse and an honest exchange of ideas.</p> <p>Each subcommittee should review the work of the other before group discussion begins.</p>

<i>Step</i>	<i>Purpose</i>	<i>Comments</i>
6. Develop a strategy for improvement based on assets and needs	Build off the prior step translating what is now understood into mechanisms for development and positive change.	The information available establishes a foundation for action plans.  Sufficient group chemistry should be there for this activity to proceed smoothly.
7. Implement plans, monitor, and evaluate as to how well they are moving forward	Put into effect the activities that have been planned, see how they are functioning, and see what the outcomes are.	Determine that plans are translated into real programs and events.  Formative and summative evaluation should be done.
8. Recycle back to earlier asset and needs findings to add more pieces to the improvement package	Pick up other facets of improvement that could not be done as first or initial activities.	Usually there will be too many pieces to proceed, so revisit previous results and move ahead with selected ones.

They devised a simple rating instrument with alternatively ordered items, half about needs and half about evaluation. If the ratings were higher for one half than the other, that tipped off where the group was in its thinking and what it might do.

The same idea applies to “scoping the context.” Shuck blinders and constraints and be open-minded as to what might be the best way to go. It is hard to do, but it is the course to follow. An example of keeping an open stance occurred when the author was contacted by a state agency (natural resources) to help with a needs assessment. They knew the needs, and there was nothing of use that he could offer. They didn’t require an assessment, but weren’t sure about the causes of the needs and were puzzled by how constituents perceived some watershed problems. It was easy to suggest that they do a straightforward survey, focus groups, or causal analysis with subsamples in specified regions. The author did not get a consulting contract but made recommendations that were attuned to the situation, not what he *a priori* could do.

In a hybrid approach, as early as feasible, community members or organizational staff should be included in the process. As explained in Chapter 3, they might interview others, seek reports and prior studies,

or observe in the setting. Whatever those activities are, they most likely will have two components—assets and strengths, and needs that arise in the course of preliminary investigation—and what comes from them are grist for the second step (deciding on action that might be taken) in the process. A facilitator or facilitating group pulls together what has been learned about needs and assets so that a discussion ensues about what is understood about the community, organization, or agency. The information, summarized, probably in factoid sheets, is distributed to everyone in the group. To get the discussion going, ask questions such as the following:

### **Assets and Resources (Strengths)**

- What are the strengths and resources that this community or organization has?
- What has been done before that improved this community or organization?
- What activities, events, and so on are liked and appreciated?
- Has anything come up about what was done quite a long time ago that perhaps should be tried again?

### **Needs**

- What are problems and issues confronting the community or organization?
- Which among these is most pressing or urgent to resolve?
- If we were to resolve some of them, which ones do you think would be of most interest to the community or organization?

From there the group considers whether it would be best to more fully assess needs, to explore resources and strengths and how they could be utilized, or to do both. Depending on the discussion, the decisions are:

**Do Nothing** Enthusiasm is lacking to proceed further, and nothing much will be accomplished, so end here. There are resources and needs, but they are not important enough to warrant further action or the investment of time and energy.

### **Focus on**

**Assets.** We are positive about our assets, resources, and strengths and sense that there is much to gain by putting time into learning more about them. Our effort should go into this.

### Focus On

**Needs.** There are needs that we are aware of in this community or organization that should be looked into in greater depth. Definitely needs assessment is what should be done.

### Do a Hybrid

**Approach.** We don't know enough about the assets and needs. We should do both activities and work to improve our situation from the knowledge gained.

If the group is undecided, start with assets and later investigate needs. Look at what is there rather than concentrating on needs. Beginning with assets puts a positive spin in motion. But eventually needs will arise.

Steps 3–5 (collecting information, arraying it for decision making, using the results) are the natural course to be followed after decisions are made to do a hybrid investigation. Community members, organizational staff, or agency personnel would be formed into working committees to collect and analyze preliminary information (data sources, reports) that is located. As much as possible, seek existing sources of information, and that is a reasonable expectation. There are census data, regional planning documents, educational status reports, and chamber of commerce studies that should be used to the fullest extent. If some data are missing, think of shortcut (cheap and quick) ways of obtaining them, or at least give indications of what full data might reveal. Placing the information into a utilitarian format for guiding deliberations is not an easy task. It is described in detail in later chapters (see Chapter 3 and particularly Table 3.3).

This is not to be externally led since it is the province of those most concerned and affected by how the results are used, but someone or the group has to take responsibility for guiding the process. It has to keep it moving apace and getting what is being garnered into reasonable tables and summaries for later use. This doesn't take place by magic, and a subtle dimension of facilitation (being a catalyst) is necessary for a successful effort. Notice it is best to have subgroups working simultaneously/independently on assets and needs; otherwise, the two components could contaminate each other prematurely.

When there is enough information to initiate thinking about next steps, schedule a meeting of the two independent groups. (It may take some time to come to this point, depending on what is found and how it informs understanding and potential change.) It is important that the data

and main findings are set up so that it is easy for everyone to see what is known about assets and needs. This might be by short tables or figures in which the findings stand out to the reader. Present results not in so much detail that their digestion is difficult and can lead to an upset stomach. Place the needs and assets/resources into categories to help participants in their review. Provide each of the groups with summaries of the others' findings for review as a small group and then go to a large group session. For the small group reviewing the needs or asset findings use thought generators like the following:

**Needs Review Group (the individuals who looked at assets)**

- How realistic do the needs seem to you?
- Were there any that surprised you?
- Are there others that seem to be missing?
- Which one or ones stand out as highest priority, and why?
- Which ones could be resolved or improved in the short run, and which are going to take a long time?

(Add in the next questions only after they have completed the prior ones.)

- When you think about what has been found about resources, are there places where you think they could be put to good use?
- Are there ways to combine resources for resolving needs or for interesting ways to move ahead?

**Assets Review Group (the individuals who looked at needs)**

- Were there any of them that surprised you?
- Are there others that seem to be missing?
- Which one or ones stand out as having the highest likelihood of access and being used?
- Which ones could be used in the short run, and which are going to take a long time?

(Add in the next questions, but only after they have completed the prior ones.)

- When you think about what you found about needs, are there places where the assets could be put to good use?
- Are there innovative opportunities to use resources that would enhance the community, organization, or agency?

Now the seeds have been planted, fertilized, and watered, and growth can take place. The last three steps (defining the action strategy, implementing and evaluating it, recycling back to areas not previously attended to) in the hybrid are where the payoff occurs. The process has moved to formulating plans for applying assets to a need or set of needs, or it can use strengths creatively—an exciting part of the journey.

One suggestion is to begin small before going large. Doing so takes less time for implementation and demonstrating outcomes. Groups require reinforcement, and shorter endeavors can produce results that satisfy the requirement. Evaluation should be built into any new activities for monitoring and demonstrating outcomes. In terms of the evaluation, pose questions to the group along the following lines:

- What should the activity look like in practice, and how will we know that it is taking place as planned?
- If an outsider were seeing it in operation, what would this person be observing?
- What is the nature of the change?
- If we were to say that the new project or effort was successful, what would that mean?
- What are indicators/outcomes that should be expected?
- How many people might be affected, in what ways would they be changed or different, how could we demonstrate success to ourselves and others, and so on?

Success might be that two or three community or organizational assets are working together where previously they haven't. Other indicators include greater participation in services, continuing work or planning for the use of resources, or the longer-term resolution of needs.

The emphasis is on smaller, more immediate initiatives, not ones that require more time and input of resources. This incremental approach is not a dodge from major concerns. Certainly a number of them have come up previously in the hybrid framework and undoubtedly are in some of the work products of the subcommittees. They are not being dismissed or forgotten but are being revisited as the group grows with success on what are admittedly easier-to-achieve objectives and starting points. If too much is attempted and not enough progress occurs, enthusiasm may weaken, and momentum will be lost and hard to regain. Avoid this at all costs.

Indeed the final step has been included for just this reason. There will be a demand to move to higher and more expansive efforts as time passes.

A lot of energy has been expended to date, so instead of beginning anew return to prior findings. What short-term and long-term projects might we now undertake? Given what we have done, could we enhance or build from it? What seems to be missing, and what might have the biggest bang for the time and resources we might devote to it? How much would it take to enhance what we currently do? Let's move to new and higher outcomes or other parts of our communities and organizations.

In most cases there will be areas like these that have been identified but not focused upon. Take a second look and see where good can be done. As the group begins that second review, more data and information on a specific area may be desirable, and it might relate to assets, resources, and/or needs. If that is the case, don't reinitiate the entire hybrid approach again. Think about what data are required and what might be shortcuts for attaining them. Heavy and long involvement in data collection may slow down things too much, dampen fervor, and be detrimental. The group should be the judge on how to keep moving and maintain momentum. The hybrid framework and its steps have been covered briefly. The latter in depth will be the substance of Chapters 3, 4, and 5.

## HIGHLIGHTS OF CHAPTER 2

1. Key terms of needs assessment and asset/capacity building were defined. It is important that they be distinguished from ECB (evaluation capacity building).
2. Needs assessment and asset/capacity building were compared showing overlaps as well as differences.
3. Attention was directed to a cooperation-collaboration continuum, and needs assessment and asset/capacity building are similar on this dimension. This concept might be termed *partnering*.
4. A hybrid framework (not a rigid model) to span the gap between needs assessment and asset/capacity building was proposed.
5. The steps in the framework were overviewed, and decisions that a group might encounter were noted.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Even though only eight steps were described, are they a sensible characterization of how the process (working within the hybrid framework) might occur?
2. Are some of the steps incorrect or out of place? If so, which ones, where, and why should changes be made?
3. Are there steps that should be added? If so, what are they, why are they necessary, and where should they be placed?
4. The process outlined in the hybrid framework must be managed in order to be successful. Who should do it, and how should it be done to keep the flavor and the spirit of involvement?
5. When you review the framework, where might it not work well, and what are your thoughts about what might be done at those points to ameliorate the situation?
6. If you have been involved in a collaborative venture before, what were its ups and downs?
7. Can needs and assets and strengths be separated in a meaningful way? What are your thoughts?
8. Community- or organization-enhancing approaches often can get bogged down if they go on for extended periods. Where might the process be shortened, and what would you suggest to shorten it?