3

Phase I: Preassessment

❖ INTRODUCTION

The "nitty-gritty" details of this phase are not emphasized to a great degree; rather the idea is to give a basic understanding of how to carry out main activities (often in the form of lists). Since needs assessments must be attuned to local politics and personalities, the focus of the assessment, available resources, and other factors, guidelines are appropriate. The three phases are flexible and modified to fit small or large organizations (government agencies, businesses, and state and national programs). Phase I is about establishing a clear direction for what potentially could be accomplished by the effort.

Due to high variability, it is complicated to plan needs assessments and budget for costs, personnel, and other aspects of the work. In 1987, Eastmond, Witkin, and Burnham suggested an intensive orientation activity that provides the facilitator and/or the needs assessment committee (NAC) with a better understanding of what is required and how to determine assignments, time required, and so on. (That approach has mutated into the cultural audit in Book 2 of the KIT.)

Assessments might, from inception, be thought of in a "chunked" fashion, which entails focusing on discrete and smaller pieces and contracting for more activity as warranted by the progress made. For example, in Phase I, assume that very preliminary (exchange of ideas) discussions have taken place with a few interested parties (administrators, key personnel, concerned individuals), and some initial information and data are available and have been perused. Going further, a number of meetings are scheduled with persons who might become potential NAC members to sort out possibilities for Phase I. This is a "chunk" of work.

If you are an external facilitator, consider the costs for meetings, materials to be prepared for them, summaries to be generated, refreshments and support, and other conditions that lead to success. Try to build in a few of the costs incurred in earlier interactions if you are able. In most instances that time will have been gratis with little or no remuneration, typical for this type of work! If you are internal and were assigned to the facilitator role or "volunteered" for it, some expenses have already been taken into account by the organization. In any case, the concerns for meetings are the same as above, and the chunking principle still applies.

Once one piece of the needs assessment is completed and there are indications that more steps and actions are necessary, they too could be divided into smaller, more manageable segments of work. This is similar to the sequential purchase of information mentioned in the prior chapter. A couple of other things are important before moving to the steps in Phase I.

First, is external or internal important? The internal facilitator has the advantage of knowing the organization, its personnel, and how it functions. The external individual tends to be more objective and not to represent any vested organizational interests. All organizations will have to think about internal or external facilitation of the process. While it is cheaper to utilize internal personnel for leadership, in the long run it might be "pennywise but pound foolish" (see Example 3.1).

Example 3.1

Don't Be Pennywise but Pound Foolish!

A public service organization, which receives support from state and federal sources, was undergoing cutbacks in funding. At the same time it was subject to rapidly changing demands with some of its services having lost their relevance. To deal with this the organization decided to conduct regional and, in some instances, countywide needs assessments via community group forums (town meetings). It sought advice on how these should be facilitated and what persons would be best to lead them. The organization was leaning toward internal regional and local personnel to reduce costs. It asked a needs

> assessment specialist to review its proposed approach. The advice was to have a smaller number of sessions led by external individuals with the assistance and guidance of internal agency personnel.
>
> Although the organization and internal personnel had the best of intentions, bias would probably have crept into the process. No matter how much they may try to not favor a particular viewpoint, internal staff may be unable to adopt the neutral stance necessary for facilitation. They bring historical baggage with them. In a subtle way, they could exude a slant on issues that may be obvious to participants in group sessions. The validity of results could be affected and called into question. In general, external facilitators will not favor any specific position—they are there to help a group open up and uncover its perceptions and feelings. The external facilitator may not have intimate knowledge of the situation and could be aided via the assistance of an internal person, but the trade-off in neutrality is too great to make the case for being pennywise by having internal individuals conduct the meetings.

Second, how much should be charged for services? Budgeting is fraught with problems arising from the politics of the situation, the harmony or disharmony of working relationships in the organization, and the many changes in direction that occur in needs assessments. What to charge is never easy to answer. A colleague (B. R. Worthen, personal communications over years) who had a very successful academic and consulting career mentioned a novel way to bill for services. For short-term jobs (a week or less) a higher daily rate deals with some of the unpaid, up-front work and the intensity that short-term tasks require. It is scaled down for a prolonged engagement. One advantage of this strategy is that it may encourage organizations to do a better, in-depth assessment with long-term expert advice shaping the process.

❖ PROCEDURES FOR PHASE I: PREASSESSMENT

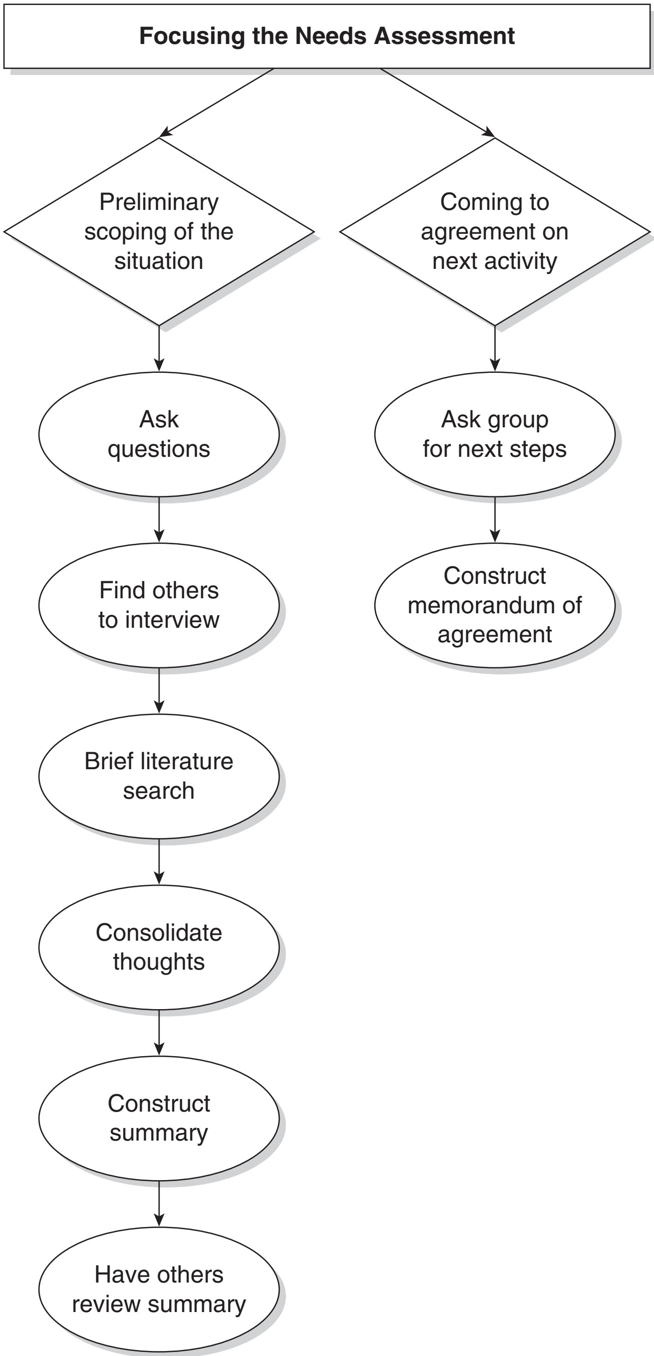
Step 1: Focusing the Needs Assessment

Focusing activities are shown in Figure 3.1; use the figure to orient groups to the initial dimensions of a needs assessment. Details are below.

1a. Preliminary Scoping of the Situation

Ask questions (see Chapters 1 and 2) in your first meetings with those who requested your services. See if there are individuals you could informally interview about their perspectives, what the issues are, where the organization currently is, what kinds of problems it

Figure 3.1 Step 1: Focusing the Needs Assessment



might run into in the future, and so on. (Make sure that you maintain the confidentiality of responses.)

Be alert for political issues and concerns; try to get a feel for how the organization ticks and how open or closed it might be. (Are some individuals or groups being excluded? Do people freely voice their opinions even when negative about something? Do they appear cautious, guarded, or even afraid and thus to be holding back? If so and you are external, consider gracefully bowing out—you don't need the headaches. If you are internal, think about focusing on a smaller part of the issue and where you can do some good.)

Conduct a quick, brief Web-based literature search on the topic(s) of interest or on other organizations that have recently undergone experiences or changes similar to this one. Read or skim a few articles.

Consolidate the concerns that arise, what seems to be the nature of the problem(s), what might be apparent about the "what should be" and "what is" states, the individuals and groups that make up the three levels, and other appropriate aspects. Keep the summary short and to the point—5–10 pages, a few tables, highlighted recommendations, and items for discussion. Consider such things as the following:

- What is the scope and size of the area(s) or topic(s) of interest?
- Would it be of value to divide the area(s) or topic(s) into sub-clusters or themes?
- Would it be useful to collect more information?
- Would the collection of new data be warranted?
- Will going to a full set of Phase I activities be needed?
- Should the organization form an NAC (explain what this is), and if so, what individuals and groups should be involved?
- What resources might the organization be willing to commit to the needs assessment (think of Phase I at this time, but bring up some Phase II and III activities)?
- How much time would a full Phase I implementation require?
- What is the importance to the organization of looking at needs and ultimately changing what it does in accord with what might be learned?

Give the summary to a few individuals with whom you have been dealing to see if it is on target. Is it clear, especially in regard to what might be done next?

1b. Come to Agreement on What Should Be Done Next

Go back to the total original group that is pushing for the needs assessment with the revised summary and talk about subsequent steps and activities. Generally this will consist of decisions such as the following:

- No more actions are required, and there is not a compelling argument to explore this area or set of concerns further.
- The organization would benefit by entering into Phase I and providing funds for subsequent phases should they be warranted.
- More extensive Phase I work may lead to Phase II activities, and the organization must be aware that this could be an outcome.
- We have learned enough to move to Phase III directly without having to collect additional data/information.

Construct a Memorandum of Agreement

Shouldn't this be done earlier? Its placement here might seem odd, but prior to this there might not be enough information to construct the memorandum. Some reconnaissance is in order before knowing exactly what might be required and what are the critical tasks before a memorandum of agreement can be formulated. If you are external, incorporate some up-front costs into the memorandum. Assuming that a decision is made to proceed with Phase I activities, address the following items:

- the formation of an NAC, its size and composition (what groups should be represented and why), and a strategy for contacting/involving members;
- a schedule of potential meetings of the NAC and what it might be doing (due to scheduling it may be better to have a relatively small committee);
- what kinds of existing data the committee will locate and digest;
- what assistance might be available from the organization and what assistance might come from other groups and organizations (librarians, regional planning commissions, etc.);
- what costs might be associated with assistance and whether current budgets will cover them or some can be donated (get firm commitments);
- what report(s) will be produced from the work of the NAC, as well as approximate dates for them (suggest length, keeping in mind that they should be short);

- to whom reports and oral summaries will be provided;
- what the overall timetable for Phase I might be; and
- an estimate of the funds necessary for the phase.

The title “Memorandum of Agreement” rather than “Contract” is intentional. It is a flexible document, not a binding contract. What happens in needs assessment is that the work can move in unanticipated directions. For example, the data collected in Phase I may yield sufficient information to render Phase II activities unnecessary, or focus might shift to the planning of solution strategies. A memorandum is better for dealing with ambiguities and uncertainties.

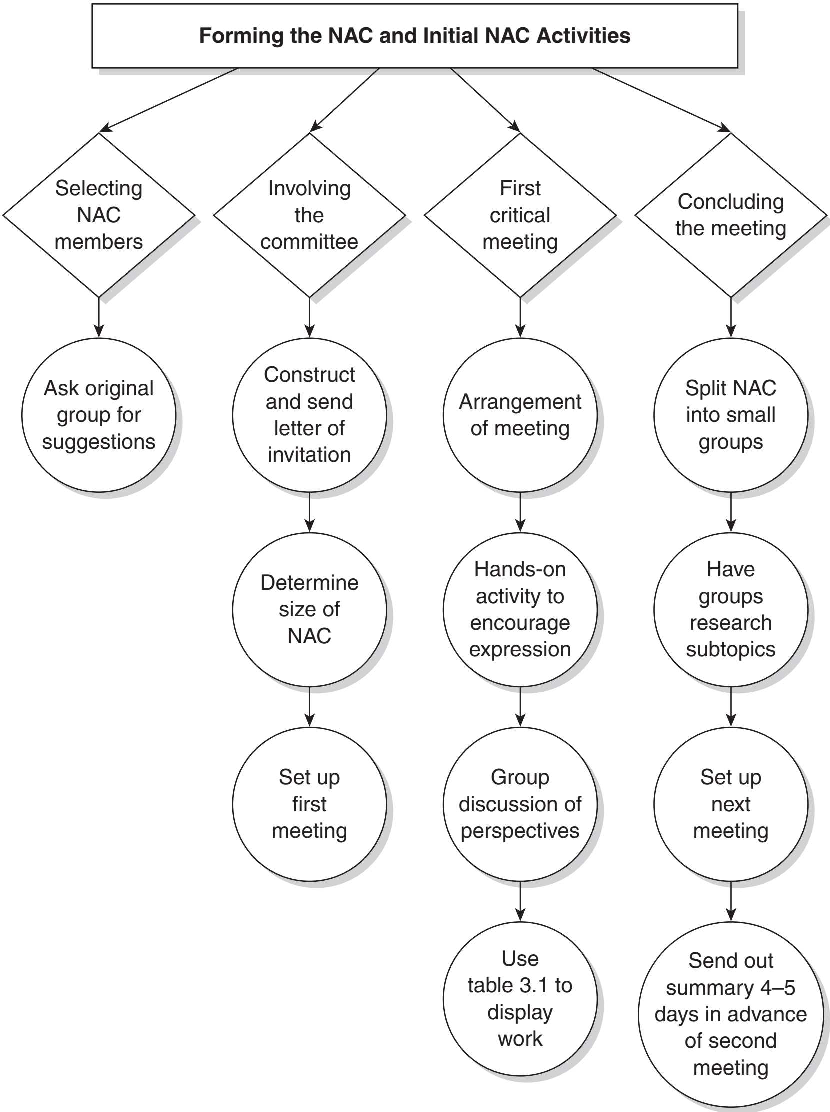
Step 2: Forming the NAC and Initial NAC Activities (See Figure 3.2)

2a. Selecting NAC Members

Reconnaissance is paying dividends. Ask the individuals you have been meeting with to offer suggestions for NAC members. Have them respond independently and see if there is a pattern to those being named. Are the same persons being mentioned (a cross-nomination process)? Guide them in the nomination process:

- Are potential nominees knowledgeable about the area of emphasis and where information regarding it might be located?
- Do they represent a reasonable balance of stakeholders or groups with interests in the topic and what might eventually result from the needs assessment?
- Are they a mix of people who are internal and external to the organization?
- Are they individuals who not only have opinions and insights about the topic but who will be active doers of committee work (the NAC is an advisory body and a working committee that participates in data collection, analysis, and interpretation)?
- Do the nominees have a reputation for an openness about their views but not being dogmatic and obstructing progress?
- Do they have special skills (data analysis and manipulation, expertise and experience in the area of focus) that will benefit the effort?

Figure 3.2 Step 2: Forming the NAC and Initial NAC Activities



For additional characteristics of NAC members, see Altschuld and Lepicki (2009b, in press).

2b. Contacting and Involving the Committee

Send the potential members a letter of invitation from a recognized organizational leader. It should include:

- the purpose of the needs assessment in helping the organization progress and improve;
- the importance of the work and why their participation is needed;
- how they were identified;
- what is expected from them and what they might be doing;
- an approximate number of meetings (usually 4–5) and the time period in which they will be held (see Ricard & Brendel, 2004, for rough estimates of the time required for an assessment);
- when they will be contacted to ascertain their willingness to serve and possible dates when a first meeting might be held; and
- an expression of appreciation for their consideration of the request.

As noted elsewhere, it is either a large NAC that is split into manageable subgroups to carry out assignments or a smaller one that is easier to convene and orchestrate. If the effort involves a topic of major importance and resolving needs requires sizeable expenditures, then probably a large NAC is better. If the needs are of lesser import, then a smaller one is OK.

With more members, scheduling problems increase exponentially, and since regular attendance at Phase I meetings is critical, a smaller NAC would suffice. NACs succeed if members are dedicated and attend. Contact possible members to solicit involvement and determine meeting times.

2c. That First Critical Meeting

The details of this meeting are important. Refreshments, location, travel reimbursements, and so forth are little things that make for a positive experience and demonstrate to the NAC the seriousness with which the needs assessment is viewed. Key agenda items are as follows:

- Introduce yourself as the facilitator and the charge to the group.
- Ask that members provide *short* introductions to themselves (some of them may already know each other) and make sure that they print their names in large letters on both sides of paper name tents.
- Ask if group members have previously been part of a needs assessment, a strategic planning effort, or another form of identifying and exploring problems (and what such activities looked like).
- Provide additional background on why they were chosen, specific purposes, the area of focus, and other related items.

- Approximate the number of meetings and when they will occur (scheduling has been mitigated through the earlier contacts).
- If you feel that they may not fully understand what is meant by need or needs assessment, provide a few fact sheets that contain basic definitions and examples of needs and/or types of needs as in Chapter 1 (emphasize that needs are gaps or problems, but for now the NAC will not be dealing with solutions).

Now it is time for an activity to get the NAC in tune with basic concepts. Book 2 of the KIT contains several such activities. Review and use them as they fit the local situation. Other examples are:

- short questionnaires that you can construct to get members of the NAC to write down their ideas about the focus of the needs assessment;
- group involvement in a fun and useful exercise based on "The Case of the Pokey Elevators" (Exhibit 3.1); and
- if future needs are of concern, finding or developing brief scenarios about events affecting the future and having the NAC offer suggestions as to what this might mean for the organization.

A short questionnaire is easily and quickly produced. It encourages the NAC to express its thoughts and perceptions about the topic of concern and should include a few mostly open-ended questions that become the basis for exchanging views. It gets the group going and might begin with a brief description (a paragraph or so) of the topic followed by thought-provoking probes:

- What do you think about the current status or performance?
- What should performance be?
- What are some problems or issues that confront us here?
- Which groups and individuals are now receiving services, and are there others that should be?
- Are there services that should be provided but are not?
- What factors seem to facilitate what we currently are doing?
- What factors inhibit efforts in this area?

NAC members jot down their thoughts, and a discussion is begun to gauge commonalities and differences. Summarize their perceptions.

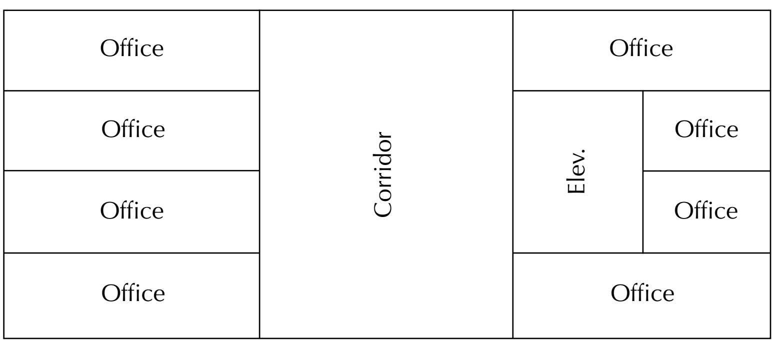
"The Case of the Pokey Elevators" is a humorous approach to starting the process and helps a group to understand a subtle issue in needs assessment, the tendency to jump to solution strategies before fully understanding the problem and what might be causing it. To use "The Case" first have individuals cover up the part of it immediately after the initial diagram with a sheet of paper. Then have them jot down their thoughts about the elevators: What's going on here, what is the problem, and what comes to mind?

Invariably, responses go like this—put in more elevators, have some elevators only go to the top floors and some to the lower floors, encourage people to walk up or down without using the elevator, start a walking-for-health campaign, and so on. Then they read the rest of "The Case," and slowly chuckles are observed around the room. Use their responses to reinforce the concept of need and needs assessment before going to solution strategies.

Exhibit 3.1 The Case of the Pokey Elevators

Once upon a time, a very responsible manager of a twenty-story office building in New York City was besieged by complaints from his tenants. "The elevators are too slow," they complained in a chorus. Being a responsible manager, he immediately called an engineering firm to have a look at the problem. During a preliminary discussion, this rough floor plan was drawn.

Figure 1



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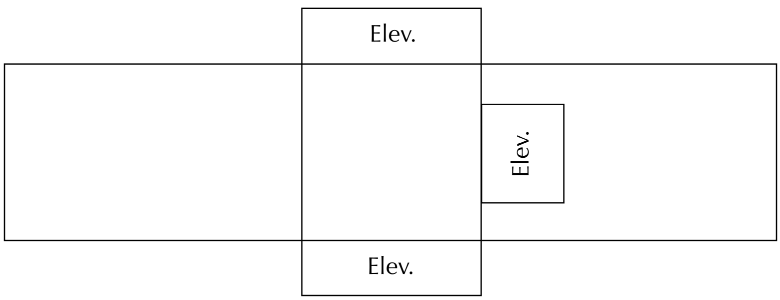
After an exhaustive study utilizing stopwatches and traffic flow charts, the engineering firm gave him a proposal for the installation of two newer and faster elevators in the existing shafts. The price tag was $100,000 for an average time gain of 3.35 minutes from top to bottom for each elevator. This shaved an average of twenty seconds off the waiting time on each floor. “My, that’s a lot of money,” he said, “and twenty seconds is not a lot of time. I’ll let you know.”

Since he was also responsible to the building owners, he called another firm. After another exhaustive study, they made their proposal. What he should do, they said, was leave the present elevators alone and add two new elevators at the ends of the central corridor like this:

Figure 2



This solution, they said, would cost a little more, $150,000 to be precise, but would save tenants much more time, i.e., an average of 35 seconds shaved off the waiting time on each floor. “My, that would do the trick,” he said uneasily, “but, I will have to consult the owners. I’ll let you know.”

Now, this is the sad part. He knew the owners would not spend that much, and the complaints were growing louder and more angry. In a fever he went to the Yellow Pages looking for someone to help him with his problem. His eyes skimmed down the page:

—”Probabilities”

—”Probers”

—”Problem Consultants”

“That’s what I need,” he said, “a problem consultant!” He quickly dialed the number.

Now this problem consultant was a strange dude. He practically went to sleep while the building manager described the problem and for the next couple of days, he wandered aimlessly through the building doing nothing as far as the building manager could see. On the third day, he wandered into the manager’s office and slouched into a chair.

> "Well," he began, "you told me that your problem was slow elevators. What that said to me was that your solution to tenant complaints was faster elevators. But that wasn't really your problem. What those folks were trying to tell you is that they are bored stiff while waiting for the elevators. That's your real problem."
>
> So for less than $1,000, mirrors were installed beside the elevators on every floor. Women straightened their hair, men their ties. There were no more complaints.
>
> *Source:* From *Planning, Conducting, and Evaluating Workshops,* by L. N. Davis and E. McCallon, 1974, Austin, TX: Learning Concepts.

Now, the committee is primed for needs assessment work. Through materials previously collected, what was learned from initial reconnaissance, or what was learned from the group discussion, begin to identify subtopics or concerns within the main topic, what might be standards or expectations ("what should be"), what the group knows or doesn't know about the current status or situation, sources of information about the two conditions, and where that information or those data might be located. If standards are available (test norms, comparative achievement, market share numbers, quality of goods produced, clients successfully and unsuccessfully treated, national goals for training and specified learning that should result, task/job analyses), provide them to the group.

Keep the discussion on track and frequently summarize on flip charts, overheads, or a quickly generated PowerPoint presentation. What issues or concerns are most important and potentially the subject for further exploration? With 12 members, the NAC could be divided into thirds with one group having Level 1 as its emphasis and the second and third groups dealing with Levels 2 and 3, respectively. Or they all could focus on one of the levels depending on where the process seems to be going. As the discussion proceeds, probe to see what the issues are and if there is general agreement on them. If the group drifts into solutions, don't discourage this but simply maintain a list (a parking lot of these) for later review and redirect its attention to needs.

It's amazing what structured groups like this can produce. But that is to be anticipated because homework is done in the beginning of Phase I by learning as much as you can about the topic, and the NAC consists of individuals who should be able to contribute because of their familiarity with the area of concern and the organization. This works in favor of a positive outcome. If the group members are not chosen well, a rich outcome may not be realized.

What is missing is a way for capturing what is being generated by the NAC. Most procedures follow a generic pattern as in Table 3.1. A table like this (modify as needed) could be used with the large group to summarize what is being derived and be given to each small group to fill in as it proceeds with its deliberations.

The value of the table is underscored. It pulls together what has transpired in the meeting as a guide to further needs assessment activity. It gives a picture of what has been discussed and tells the NAC where the information exists within the system or where it might be located external to the organization. It gets the NAC to thinking about what concerns are there and what will have to be collected to learn more about them.

Another feature of the table is that most of the data tend to be in available sources rather than from new ones. These are the archival class of methods given in Chapter 2. Other data collection procedures for Phase I might be used, but for the most part that work will be minimal. Separate tables for Levels 1, 2, and 3 could be generated and discussed by the large group for deletions, additions, and so on. Such tables can have many versions. Needs assessment procedures are flexible and designed with the local context in mind.

One slight disadvantage that the facilitator should be aware of is that so many areas and subareas might arise that the large group or the small ones lose concentration, dissipate energy, or come to feel that the needs and the entire enterprise are overwhelming. So even at this early stage in the process, some informal prioritization takes place, and the NAC will naturally work with the higher-priority areas and subareas within them.

Table 3.1 One Useful Format for Displaying the Initial Work of the NAC

Area of Concern	*What Should Be*	*What Is*	*Sources of Information*	*What We'd Like to Know*	*Sources of Information*
Area 1 Subarea Subarea	Standards, expectations	Current status	Records, archives	More about status, perceptions of status, etc.	Other records, interviews, etc.
Area 2 Subarea Subarea Subarea					
Area *n*					

2d. Concluding the Meeting and Next Steps

Ending with just the table would be a successful but insufficient result. A great deal of brainstorming has occurred and is showing up on the table(s) in rough form. How good was this work? Will existing data provide meaningful insights about areas in the table? Do the data actually exist? In what form are they, and what is their quality? Do the data illuminate whether a need is really there and what its nature might be? What about the entries where the group did not know much and desires to learn more?

Now the NAC is split into three or four small groups with assignments of finding the source of data, what form they are in, and how accessible they are. As the NAC locates information, it is provided between the first and second meetings to the facilitator for insertion into the initial table(s). The data come from databases, existing lists of organizational resources, previous reports, the literature, a sampling of records, and a few interviews.

Set a time for the next meeting—2–4 weeks after the first one. The interim period should be sufficient for knowledgeable NAC members to find materials and data but not so long that they lose momentum. Send electronic summaries of what is happening about 4–5 days in advance of the second meeting.

Step 3: The Next Several Meetings of the NAC (See Figure 3.3)

3a. Continuing to Complete Table(s)

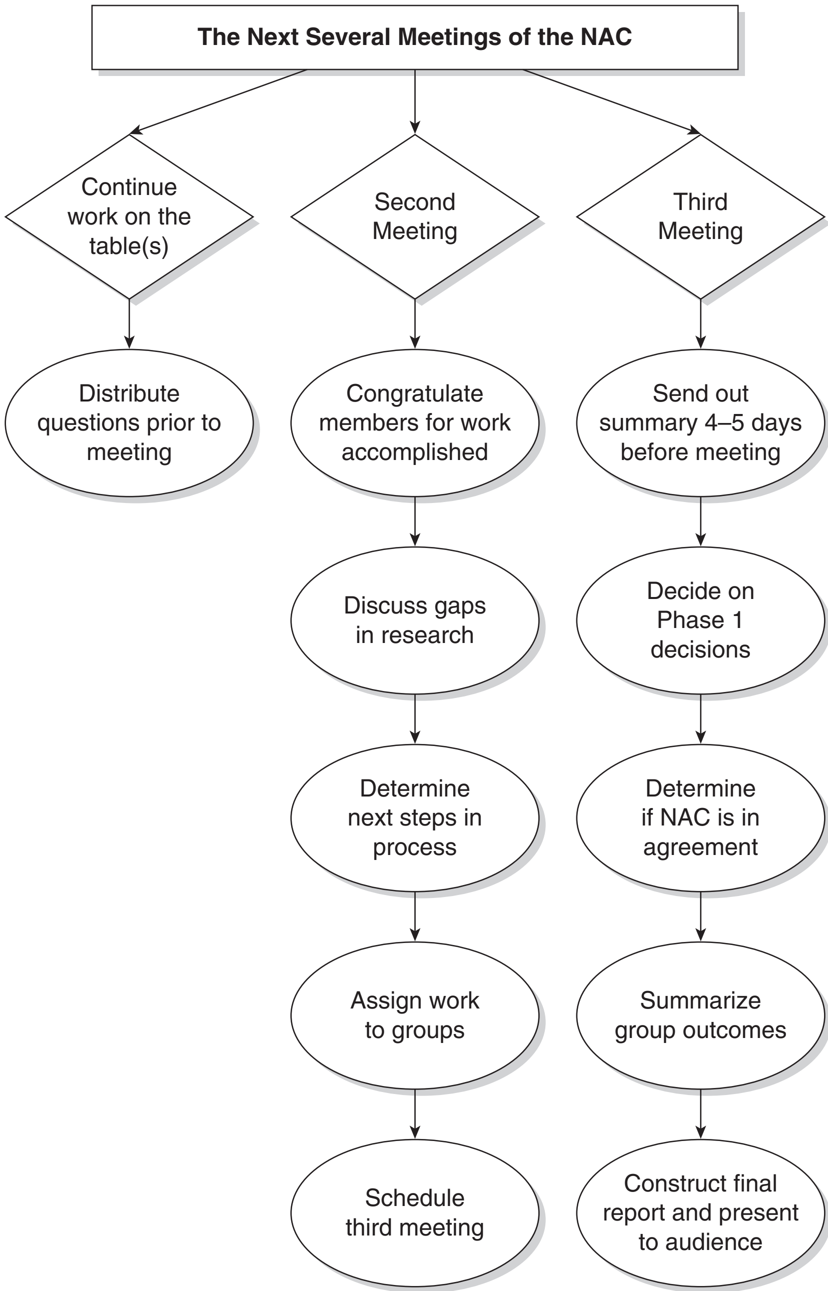
The NAC has gone from being an advisory committee to being active in collecting information related to needs. As the table(s) are being completed, empty or partially filled cells represent a lack of knowledge or the desire to learn more.

The facilitator fills in the table(s) from information found by the NAC. The expanded version(s) are critical input for the second meeting. In preparation for it, the facilitator might do the following:

- maintain both the original and newer table(s) to help the NAC gauge progress being made and what else has to be done;
- develop an agenda for the meeting; and
- generate a list of questions to guide discussion around what is known and in what areas additional data should be sought.

Distribute the questions and agenda to the NAC prior to the meeting so it can consider where the process is and what to do next.

Figure 3.3 Step 3: The Next Several Meetings of the NAC



3b. Conduct the Second Meeting

This is where needs assessment gets exciting! Progress is visually evident. The NAC has accomplished much in a relatively short time. Go over what has been learned and where gaps in knowledge still exist. Raise more questions:

- Do we feel comfortable enough in certain areas with what is there, and would more data collection be useful or a waste of time?
- Where should we continue the data collection efforts (are there major areas to do so, and where might key sources be)?
- Are there some areas that require new data (Phase II) since there are no existing or insufficient sources in quality and substance?
- Are there other ideas (causal factors, possible solutions, barriers to solutions) picked up in the process of collecting data?

Although the focus in Phase I is not on causality or solutions, they have arisen and will be useful for later work. This is where that "parking lot" comes to the fore. During the meeting ask NAC members about such features and record their thoughts for subsequent referral.

Lastly, as the NAC examines where it is in the process, lead it toward next steps. It is possible yet unlikely that enough will have been obtained to complete Phase I, to make decisions about Phase II or Phase III actions, or to terminate the endeavor as not being worth further time, money, and energy. It usually takes another meeting with associated data collection in the intervening period before decisions are made. Attain consensus in the NAC for next steps, assign the work, and schedule the third meeting 2–3 weeks from this date.

All interim periods in the text are approximations with variations expected due to the scope and complexity of the needs assessment. Much more time would be required for one of national scope or for one that had complicated data sets needing specialized expertise beyond that of the NAC. Individuals with requisite skills would have to be involved with funds allocated for such purposes. Timelines are adjusted, and as cited before, there has to be budget flexibility in needs assessment. (Note: Phase I is predicated on three NAC meetings after initial reconnaissance and selection of the NAC; depending on the specific situation, more may be necessary. The number is determined by how quickly the assessment can be focused and the availability and accessibility of data and ease of analysis and synthesis.)

3c. Conduct the Third Meeting of the NAC

Follow the same procedure used between the first and second meetings and produce a summary of how the NAC was formed, the general process for Phase I activities, what transpired in the initial and follow-up meetings (attach agendas), key areas identified for further Phase I attention, collection of data, and the building of the table(s). Send this out as it is produced, along with new information about 4–5 days before the next meeting. Date the tables.

Now the whole process is in high gear.

- What gaps are apparent in our table?
- Are the needs of sufficient strength to propose doing anything more?
- Should we go to Phase II and begin generating new data collection mechanisms (surveys, epidemiological studies, interviews, etc.)?
- Is there enough understanding of needs to ask what factors are causing them and which of the factors are not under the aegis of the organization?
- Do we perceive what the needs are for Levels 2 and 3, as related to their provision of services or goods for Level 1?
- Do we sense what might be the highest-priority needs at this time?
- Might it be possible to move directly into Phase III?

The facilitator is moving the NAC to final Phase I decisions. Once the group has examined and discussed the outcomes of its work, see if a consensus is emerging. A straw poll will determine if agreement is there, and in the majority of needs assessments it will be. Where it is not, perhaps the group is disagreeing on a few needs but is in accord for others. Ask if those could be chosen as the focal point for next steps.

It might be useful to resurrect and discuss the parking lot. Seek other ideas about causes of needs and potential solution strategies, keeping in mind that they are preliminary perceptions. Remind the NAC that this is a brainstorming activity, helpful for future input but not the final answer.

The work of the committee will be part of a report made to decision makers who must commit to the next steps recommended by the NAC. It is important to communicate to a larger audience in the organization, in summarized form, what the group has done and outcomes so far. Consider a broader distribution especially if the needs assessment is pertinent to external stake-holding groups.

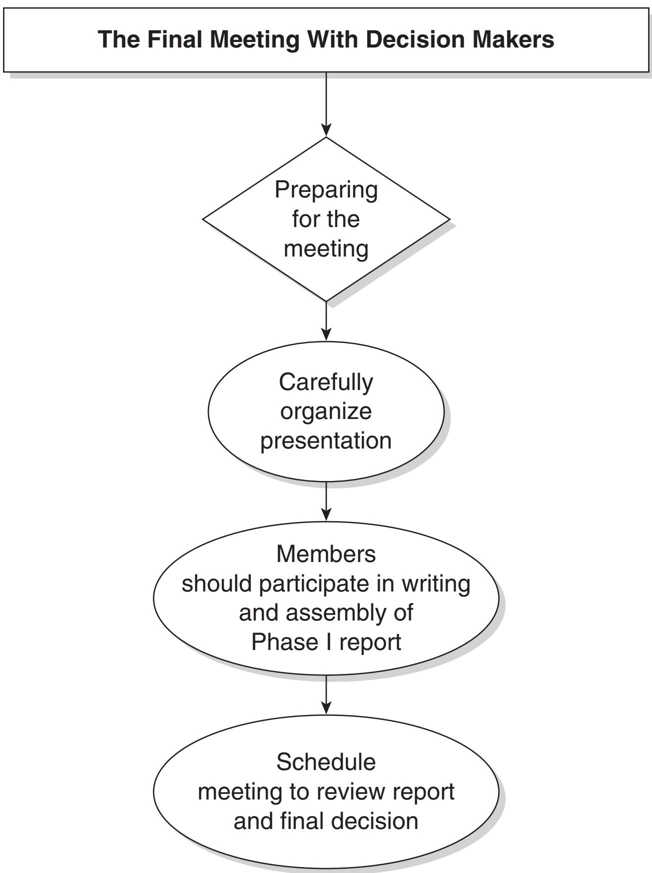
NAC members should be at the meeting when the final report is presented to decision makers (see Step 4). Other meetings with a wider cross-section of the organization could be scheduled. If some members of the NAC could come to them, it would demonstrate support for findings.

Step 4: The Final Meeting With Decision Makers (See Figure 3.4)

4a. Preparing for the Meeting

The presentation must be carefully organized and build on the thoughtful work of the NAC. Several committee members should

Figure 3.4 Step 4: The Final Meeting With Decision Makers



participate in writing and assembling the Phase I report. With agendas, tables, and documentation it is a lasting record of the needs assessment, a history of who was involved, what they did and found, sources of information (a good result by itself), what was recommended and why, and other important things.

Think of all activities related to the investigation of needs as a kind of seamless problem-solving process in the shape of a funnel. It goes from first narrowing the focus to identifying and prioritizing needs, analyzing causes, and concluding with the selection and implementation of a solution to rectify a prioritized subset of needs (problems). It is difficult to avoid blending these steps together in subtle ways no matter how hard we try.

Therefore, why not use everything collected in Phase I, all the formal and more informal information about causes and tentative ideas in relation to solution strategies? Make sure that the tenuous nature is clearly labeled, and issues will have to be explored more subsequently in the needs assessment process, if for no other reason than it is interesting and will provoke more thought about needs.

Table 3.2 was designed with that in mind. Based on the last meeting of the NAC, this table could be fashioned. First, present to those making decisions Table 3.1, which contains what was learned about each of the areas of need and subareas within them. Then provide Table 3.2 with those parts of Table 3.1 (in bold) that became key foci of Table 3.2.

Also provide short bulleted points of recommendations for next actions, why they are being made, possible causes of needs or problems, and potential solution strategies for them. Make sure that the last two entries in Table 3.2 are labeled as preliminary thinking. Engage the decision makers in a discussion of the implications for the organization of what has been learned in Phase I. (Remember to date the tables.)

Table 3.2 A Phase 1 Decision-Oriented Framework

Need Area and Subareas	*Further Actions Required*	*Reasons for Further Action*	*Preliminary Ideas About Causes and Solutions*	
Area 1 Subarea 1 Subarea 2				
Area 2				
Area 3				
Area *n*				

Suggest that they schedule another meeting to review further what has been done and what they support for continued needs assessment activity. Offer that you and several NAC members could be there to explain facets of what has been done for clarification and explanatory purposes. The decision makers have the final responsibility for decisions about resources, personnel allocations, and future directions.

Highlights of the Chapter

1. NAG, NAG, NAG! Oops—that is, NAC, NAC, NAC! The NAC is the mover of the needs assessment process. Its drive and interest make for success of the effort. This cannot be overemphasized, and the implications of not choosing well and not carefully organizing for how this group functions are obvious.
2. Organization for Phase I is very important. The responsibility for meeting planning, monitoring during interim periods, and presenting the public face of the assessment is that of the facilitator. Stay on top of tasks and maintain contact with the subcommittees as they do their work. The facilitator has three roles in needs assessment—planner, maintainer, and coach.
3. Too often it is assumed that it will take a good deal of time and resources to study needs and to draw action-based conclusions from their results. The assumption is not quite correct. Organizations are frequently awash in information, or external groups can supply much that is relevant. Phase I, by using what exists, thus making the effort easier and preventing needless investment in it.
4. An issue in Phase I is how wide or narrow in scope a needs assessment should be. There are dangers in its being too wide (loss of direction; feelings that nothing will be achieved, that the problems are too great to be resolved, that resource allocations will be spread too thin to make a difference). Narrowing too much may have the effect of not having enough meaning or not leading to changes in the situation and improvement (little good will occur from resolving this small problem; nobody will notice any changes). There are no rules for scope. Trust in the wisdom of the NAC; its members know the heartbeat of the organization, and via their insight, the scope should hopefully be appropriate.