Just as a physician wants to establish a clear diagnosis before administering treatment, as "organizational healers," it is critical that we begin by carefully assessing current organizational reality. Even for relatively limited engagements, we always want to build in some kind of data gathering to create a firm foundation for our interventions.

We cannot rely solely on the viewpoint of the person who hires us. Organizational systems are far too complex to understand by listening only to the perspective of one person. In the assessment process, we may well find that what the client believes they want may not actually be what they need.

## Opening Pandora's Box

The assessment is itself a change process. Approach it with the same care you would any consulting intervention. Delivering the results of an assessment can be like opening Pandora's Box. Once people begin thinking and talking about the organization and its challenges and opportunities, hopes and expectations are raised. It becomes critical that leadership be prepared to respond to what gets opened up. Test for this readiness before undertaking an assessment.

## The Challenges

In undertaking assessments, there is a range of organizational dynamics that need to be managed in order to gather good information:

- **Lack of open communication**: fear of speaking honestly
- **Beliefs & Blinders**: assumptions and habitual ways of thinking
- **Denial**: unwillingness to confront truths with potentially unsettling implications
- **Forest & Trees**: lost in details; difficulty in seeing larger perspectives
- **Overwhelm**: the urgency of fighting today's battles that limits self-reflection
- **Defensiveness**: not wanting to expose shortcomings to others

It is our job to show up in our mastery, with a range of tools at our disposal, to meet these challenges

## Varieties of data

There are four broad kinds of data that can be collected, depending on the nature of our proposed engagement.

### 1. What those in the organization see:

There is great wisdom within the hearts and minds of people who work in an organization. As consultants engaged in transformational work, we will almost always want to explore how the organization sees itself – its culture, its performance, and its leadership. The key is knowing what to ask and making it safe for people to say what they really think and feel.

2. **Data-driven indicators of organizational performance and impact:**
   There is the well-known cognitive bias called the Lake Wobegon effect (named after Garrison Keillor's fictional town where "all the children are above average"). People tend to over-estimate their positive abilities and qualities. For example, 85% of people believe their intelligence to be above average. What people believe to be true about their own organization may not be the whole truth.

   Depending on the goals of the change process, organizational self-assessment may need to be balanced by assessing more “objective” indicators such as performance metrics, benchmarking against sector standards, etc.

3. **Direct observation**
   We can learn a lot about an organization by observing it in action. This is typically done best by experienced outsiders (e.g., consultants, allies, etc.). Organizational leaders are rarely sufficiently objective, and their presence tends to significantly alter the behavior they are trying to observe.

4. **Environmental scan:**
   Depending on the nature of the engagement, we may also need to look at the organization in the context of its environment. The environmental scan might include:

   - Things that impact the organization, but are not under its control: economic conditions, political climate, government regulations, technological advances, changing demographics, funder priorities, competition, etc.
   - How others perceive the organization: allies, political opponents, potential supporters, media scans, public polling, etc.

## Our methods

There is a range of methods we can employ for conducting organizational assessments. These will be more or less relevant depending on the nature of your proposed engagement.

- **Individual interviews**
  These are the most time/resource intensive, but provide the greatest opportunity for two-way exchanges and gathering qualitative data. They can also serve the important additional function of building rapport and trust between the consultant and key stakeholders.

- **Focus Groups**
  These can reach more people, though some of the intimacy and safety of the one-in-one interviews is lost.

- **Surveys**
  These have the important advantage of being able to collect a lot of quantitative and some qualitative data in a cost-effective and efficient manner.

- **Direct observation**
  For example, observing Board or senior staff meetings, watching the performance of organizational processes, etc.


 

- **Review of organizational documentation** (e.g., minutes of meetings, policy handbooks, organizational history and milestones, etc.)

- **Review of organizational data** (e.g., performance metrics)

- **Research on external data** (e.g., media scans, analysis of competition, etc.)

## Some Key Principles in Assessment

### 1. Gather multiple perspectives

Like the parable of the blind men trying to describe an elephant by the different part of its body they are touching, people in organizations have very different perspectives on reality. Often this has to do with variables such as their degree of positional power, their department or role in the organization, how long they've been on staff, their race or gender, etc.

Make sure the sample size is adequate and that the data you collect presents a well-rounded perspective.

### 2. Build ownership

From the outset, engage the clients in owning the assessment process. In addition to using your own professional judgment in deciding what information to gather, be sure to ask the client what <u>they</u> want to know. Make sure that the information you collect represents the interests and perspectives of all stakeholders. The assessment is an important opportunity for the client to learn more about themself. Ask them what they would like to know. In addition to pre-determined questions, always create some opportunity for those being interviewed or surveyed to offer <u>whatever</u> input they may want into the assessment. In certain situations, there may be advantages to having staff gather information themselves – for example, running focus groups or conducting interviews with community leaders, organizational members, volunteers, or prospective supporters.

### 3. Make it safe

To state the obvious, in order to get good data from people in the organization, they need to feel safe in sharing their honest opinions. Whether in surveys or interviews, it is critical that people feel their confidentiality will be protected. Direct quotes typically need not to be attributed, and sometimes edited to protect anonymity. Especially in situations where there is low trust between senior leaders and staff, you may be initially viewed as an "agent" of management and will need to take special care in creating rapport and building trust, positioning yourself as being there to serve the organization and its mission.

### 4. Validity

As much of the data in organizational assessments is qualitative, we must strive for both validity and the appearance of validity. In addition to making sure the sample size and selection warrants drawing the needed conclusions, there is skill required to design instruments and protocols for assessment. How we ask questions greatly impacts the answers we receive.

Numerical data tends to be very convincing, so it is helpful to measure relative intangibles such as organizational climate, opinions, and feelings through the use of Likert scales (numerical scales registering degree of agreement or disagreement with a given statement). This also creates benchmarks against which to measure later progress.

Direct quotes add color, nuance, and impact to reports. While your personal observations and conclusions are expected and can be very helpful, they are seen by clients as opinion and therefore subject to questioning or disagreement. Direct quotes from stakeholders are hard to dispute.

### 5. Watch for observer bias (that's you!)

Findings are greatly impacted by where your attention gets drawn, your choice of questions and the way you frame them, and your non-verbal expressions of interest or non-interest in responses. Learn about your own biases and strive to compensate for them. Do you tend to sympathize with the less powerful in organizations, or perhaps over-identify with the leader? Do you tend to pay more attention to inter-personal dynamics or structural issues? Are you attuned to how issues of race or gender may be at play? Be mindful of jumping to premature conclusions in your research. It is very easy to start forming theories early on in an assessment process and then unconsciously begin fitting subsequent data into your tentative conclusions.

### 6. Take care with the reporting process

Receiving intensive feedback is a vulnerable process for clients, and the process deserves our upmost attention and care. There are frequently surprises in the assessments, and the feedback can be unsettling or even upsetting to clients. It is preferable not to simply hand reports to clients. Better to walk the client through the assessment, preferably face to face, in order to gauge reactions and impact. For groups, it can useful to put data up on either flip charts or slides so that peoples' attention doesn't become buried in papers. Read quotes aloud, literally bringing peoples' voices into the room, with appropriate expression, for maximum impact. The written reports are also critical documentation, as people need time to review and digest the information, to refer back as needed, and to share the information with others.

Reporting is sometimes an iterative process. For example, we may review an assessment with a leader before sharing it with the entire team. This is especially true if the report is surprising, highly provocative, or contains difficult feedback for the leader. In some cases, the client may wish to have summarized or edited versions for different groups of stakeholders.

The last part of the assessment usually consists of the recommendations that we make to our clients for how to address the opportunities and challenges highlighted in the report. Have clear plans in place for how support clients in dealing with next steps.

## The Transformational Edge

Assessments are a standard element of traditional organizational development projects. How do we add a transformational perspective to this early step in the change process?

### 1. Bring a Systems Approach

As always in transformational change, make sure to engage all three domains of the Wheel of Change. View the organization, its culture and functioning equally through the three perspectives of Hearts & Minds, Behavior, and Structure.

### 2. Be the Change

As in all transformational work, the presence of the change agent is a key element. Hold the assessment as a change process, rather than treating it like a prelude to the real work. Every interaction with the client is an opportunity to seed transformation. Your own authenticity is one of the greatest gifts you can bring to your clients. Ask the questions that no one has dared to ask. Share the simple truths than many know but few have the courage to name. Be bold and compassionately ruthless in serving the client and the success of its mission. If your engagement goes no further than the assessment, see what lasting value you can create.

### 3. Embody deep listening and compassion

Human beings carry deep needs to be heard, to be understood. If you show up in a way that is credible, present, safe, and honest, most people will appreciate the chance to reveal themselves and their perceptions and feelings about their organization. In actuality, many people will pour their hearts out to a truly compassionate listener. The safety that you create in giving people the opportunity to speak their truths not only gives you data, but also builds bonds of trust that will be invaluable to you going forward as a change agent in the system. The assessment process, done well, builds energy and helps to create the necessary pre-conditions for organizational transformation.

### 4. Ask Transformational Questions

Marilee Goldberg in *The Art of the Question*[1] says, *"A paradigm shift occurs when a question is asked inside the current paradigm that can only be answered from outside it."* As change agents, even in the assessment phase we can help seed transformation by asking questions that surface and challenge basic assumptions, stimulate new and creative thinking, raise energy, and evoke even more questions.[2] See our tool: *The Art of Questioning*

## In conclusion

The assessment process is a critical early step in organizational transformation. By collecting good-quality information, we get a clearer sense of what's working, what's not, and can test the appetite for and potential resistance to change. Excellent assessment not only helps provides you with the information you need to deliver results as a change agent; it gives you and the client a shared picture of current reality. Consultant and client now have a means to align perceptions and theories of change for how to proceed. Finally, by bringing a transformative edge to the assessment process, we lay the foundation for transformational change.

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[1] John Wiley & Sons, Hoboken, 1997

[2] Vogt, Brow & Issacs, *The Art of Powerful Questions.* **http://www.theworldcafe.com/pdfs/aopq.pdf**