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Roger Kaufman

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Roger Kaufman is professor emeritus at Florida State University and a distinguished research professor at the Sonora Institute of Technology in Mexico. Kaufman is the recipient of a U.S. Homeland Security/U.S. Coast Guard medal for Meritorious Public Service. He also has been awarded the International Society for Performance Improvement's (ISPI) top two honors: Honorary Member for Life and the Thomas F. Gilbert Award.

He is a past ISPI president and a founding member, and is the recipient of ASTD's Award for Distinguished Contribution to Workplace Learning and Performance. Kaufman has published 40 books and more than 275 articles. His latest book is [Needs Assessment for Organizational Success](#) (ASTD Press), co-authored with Ingrid Guerra-López.

What is needs assessment and why is it so important to understand?

Needs assessment is often talked about and poorly understood—and when done poorly, this leads to lousy results. Many are actually "wants" assessments and don't focus on results and consequences.

Need is frequently used as a verb: "I need to do this" or "I need more training." This dumps you into a solution—a means—before you know the problem.

If you use need as a gap between current results and the desired results, this allows you to talk about results first. It also allows you to prioritize those needs on the basis of the cost to meet the

need or close the gap in results versus the cost to ignore it. Then select the best means to close those gaps. If one looks only at wants or means, you tend to rush into solutions before knowing the problems.

Needs assessment harvests the gaps in results at three levels that I call the mega level—the societal value added; the macro level—the organizational level at which each organization can or does deliver outside of itself; and the micro level—the individual or small-group level. These have to be linked and aligned. The primary focus on mega is what is usually missing from conventional approaches.

So needs assessment harvests those gaps in results at the three levels and puts them in priority order. If you don't do that at the three levels, you'll start solving problems that don't really exist. Geary Rummler famously said, "If you pit an outstanding performer against a dysfunctional organization, the dysfunctional organization will win every time."

Needs assessment takes the broad view and says that every organization is a means to societal ends, and if an organization doesn't add value to external clients and society, they don't have a future. As we point out in the book, it's really very simple to do, but sometimes you just have to get rid of old scripts and comfortable ways of doing things.

What are some of your early interests and how did they shape your work in the learning field?

My early interests were in psychology. I ended up getting a bachelor's degree in psychology; a master's degree at Johns Hopkins University in both industrial engineering and industrial psychology; and then I went on to study psychology at the University of California, Berkeley, and got my PhD in communications at New York University, with my dissertation validating a particular type of instructional design that was called intrinsic programming.

I always was interested in trying to make things better, and I was always bothered by how do you know that what you're doing is really going to be better? That's where I got interested in needs assessment.

Before I went to academia, I worked at Martin-Baltimore, which is now Lockheed-Martin, and then at Boeing in the human engineering realm. I got the interest of our executives at Boeing, who said, "Well, look, if this stuff works for instruction, will it work for the organization?"

That's how my interest got implemented and then followed. But nobody would remember it if it weren't for the brilliant people in our early days. Bob Corrigan started the Learning Sciences Division of Litton Industries in Anaheim, California. One day, he said, "You know, the government contracts keep asking, 'How do you demonstrate needs?'" So I scribbled out something on a napkin there that a need is a gap in results. That was my first insight. This was in the 1960s.

How did you launch your work on needs assessment?

When our son, Jac, was four or five years old, we were driving on the freeway in San Diego and like most four-year-olds, he asked me a question. I'd answer and he said, "Why?" I'd answer why, and he'd come back with "Why?"

I realized between the third and fourth request that I was running out of rational reasons. I started to say, "Because I say so."

We really have to find out why we do something. That was where my mind started evolving to the three levels of societal, organization, and individual. This also got me tuned in to the fact that what we do today must add value to all of us, including tomorrow's child.

I worked with some of the best psychotherapists in the world, including Harold Greenwald and Ted Blau. I bounced the thought to them and they said, "Our clients come in all the time and say, 'We need him' or 'I need her.' Once they've done this, they've cut their options down to one and don't realize they have any options."

So we used this model in the Houston Mental Health Institute, and I ended up writing a book using this for individuals called *30 Seconds That Can Change Your Life: A Decision-Making Guide for Those Who Refuse to be Mediocre*. It's about how you can apply this way of thinking and acting to your personal life as well.

I really blame my son, Jac, for doing all this because as smart kids would do, he kept asking me why and I realized that I had to get the data instead of saying, "Because I said so."

What it is about your work in organizational learning that's really inspired you?

What inspires me is how many smart people there are in the field. If you look at the stable of people who publish with ASTD and other places, we are now starting to see whether organizational learning is important. And the answer is yes, it is, because that's where concept and planning gets translated into results and things that can add value at all three levels of results, including the workplace.

What's happening now in organizational learning, and ASTD is one of the leaders in this, is people are saying that it's not just individual human performance improvement. You have to align that with what an individual performer accomplishes with organizational accomplishment and then external clients' and societal value added.

So more and more this field is expanding to not deny organizational learning and not deny training and not deny individual performance improvement, but to say let's make sure that what gets done at the operational level adds value up the value chain. So I find it very encouraging and inspiring that this is the trend, and ASTD has been a leader in this.

What are a few trends that you've noticed in workplace learning that you also find inspiring?

Both inspiring and troubling at the same time is technology. Technology is a great, great tool. But a lot of people are saying it's the end in itself and not the means to an end. So I'm seeing that more and more people are looking at technology and social media. The trend is to look at it as a means, not an end. So I think that's very encouraging.

The other thing that's happening is that instead of the quick fixes and the seven-step magic checklist in good training, people are starting to look at: what is to be accomplished and why should it be accomplished? These are people we're talking about, not some inanimate objects. Are there different kinds of things about reward and punishment in the societal context and organizational context that are important? We're starting to look at this in a larger scale.

As we do it, it gets more complex but it also gets more inspirational and more exciting because we're now looking at the data of learning, and a lot of tantalizing stuff is coming out of biology and physiology. We're finding out lots of things that can facilitate learning, and so that's helping this go on. It's fascinating and it will continue to make a contribution.

What's your most exciting project that's coming up in the near future?

What's going on now is several universities have picked up on the MBA and doctorate program that several of us have put together at the Sonora Institute of Technology in Mexico. Mariano Bernardez, Geary Rummler before he passed away, Dale Brethower, Ingrid Guerra-Lopez, and I put together a master's and PhD program there that the president of Mexico cited as one of two of the most innovative programs in Mexico.

We also set up a performance improvement institute where students can't come alone to get a PhD; they have to bring a corporate sponsor. The corporate sponsor has to commit to several things: funding; learn the basic concepts that the doctoral student is learning; and implement the results of the doctor dissertation when the student comes back full time.

There's no gap between theory and practice. And it was so successful that they have a number of corporate sponsors who decided, "Hey, I'm going to get a PhD in this myself." The other thing that's still on hold is we did a project for the president and the minister of tourism of Panama where we took the methodology we talked about in this book, *Mega Thinking and Planning*, and we applied it to the transformation of the city of Colón, which is the second largest city in Panama and a disaster because 42 percent of the buildings are condemned.

In two-, three-, and four-story buildings they have 100 to 150 families living in them and run by six gangs. Cruise ships don't want to dock there anymore, because although it's a beautiful colonial city, it's not safe.

We showed them how using this kind of methodology to transform Colón, they could get a positive return-on-investment within one year. We were using Mariano Bernardez's two-level business case, which is mega and macro. We're hoping that the approach is going to move forward.

The other thing is I keep getting invited to nice places to give workshops and seminars. Recently I have been working with a Mexican consulting firm as well as projects in Guatemala. There's a lot of stuff that's happening and more of what I want to do is keep involving my former doctoral students, so that they can do a lot of the work and maybe make a little extra money. There are a lot of interesting things that are happening and I think this book with ASTD is really going to help to accelerate that.

When you're not speaking or giving workshops or writing books, what kind of activities do you like to do?

Because we get invited to nice places, my wife and I like to see the culture of other countries. We were recently in Macedonia and the interesting political turmoil where the country of Greece doesn't want them to be called Macedonia because they think that's their territory. And we also get to sample the food and the culture. We recently went to Iceland just to see what's going on up there.

Pretty soon, we'll go to other places in Central and South America as well as Europe. Usually, I'm selfish enough to try to tack it onto some consulting or speaking. I like to travel and look forward to making a contribution to the health, safety, and well-being of people everywhere.

Doing good and making money must not be mutually exclusive. That way we can be practical, ethical, and successful.