



## **Professional Development Tip #2**

How many of us have stood in front of a group of adult learners (e.g., students, seasoned providers, stakeholders) and thought, “Why am I here?” or maybe better yet, “Why are they here?”

We’ve all been in this situation, likely more than once, and wouldn’t it have been nice to be able to answer the question posed by the “little voice in our head?” Wouldn’t it be nice, the next time you find yourself in this situation, to know more about the challenges the group is facing, what experiences they have related to the topic on which you are training, and/or have a sense of what motivates them as adult learners?

If you are like me, there have been times where you, systematically, engaged in some sort of “needs assessment.” For example:

- You sent out a survey to registered students to find out what other classes they had taken, why they had registered for your class, and to rate their beliefs and skills on key topics that you planned to discuss over the course of the semester.
- You asked the agency that hired you to give you the names of a few providers who would be willing to tell you more about the families and children they serve, to identify top needs, and to rate their own skills across key practices.
- You facilitated a poll or a “hopes and fears” icebreaker activity that allowed you to get a quick sense of where the adult learners were, in terms of readiness, and how you could best meet their goals.

Sounds good right? So why haven’t you continued with these practices, or when have your efforts left you with more questions than answers?

Here are a few reasons and challenges you’ve likely faced when conducting “*needs assessments*”:

- Students don’t always register in a timely fashion and who has the time to contact them when you’re still trying to get your syllabus done and Blackboard® populated?
- You may ask the agency who hired you about past PD efforts and what they are hoping to accomplish, only to learn that they heard you were pretty funny and it doesn’t really matter what you talk about, as long as it was somewhat entertaining.
- You start a coaching session with a “needs assessment,” only to find out that there are about 300 different agendas and only a staff of 12.

So, beyond the challenges our work often presents, do you think there could be a larger issue that “needs” our attention?

I do...and I’m learning that I have approached getting to know adult learners from the wrong perspective.

In other words, in my efforts to plan, personalize, and ensure change in practice, I’ve focused on *NEEDS* (we do call them “needs assessments,” after all) when, perhaps, I should have been focusing on strengths. The idea of focusing on the strengths when working with children and families is not new, so how did I miss it when it comes to working with adult learners?

Growing research supports this mindshift from needs to strengths. In fact, positive affective states are necessary when adults engage in problem solving and creative thinking. Further research shows that working from strengths or assets, rather than identifying needs or weaknesses, allows adult learners to experience greater openness to change and growth.

Sound good? Sound challenging?

To help us move in the direction of strengths versus needs, I once again asked evaluation expert, Tina Ughrin of [Smile Minded Smartworks, LLC](#), to provide us with a few answers and suggestions:



**Question 1:** Tina, have you seen a shift from looking at needs to identifying strengths; and if so, what do you see as pros and cons?

**Tina:** Yes, recent research across multiple fields has highlighted the importance of shifting to a strength or asset-based perspective. The shift is intended to reduce adult learners’ feelings of defensiveness, lower anxiety, and provide learners scaffolding to move toward their goals and aspirations. This perspective will still uncover opportunities for growth. However, a strength-based approach does run the risk of overlooking growth opportunities unless those engaging in the perspective intentionally seek them.

**Question 2:** Let’s say we want to adopt a strength-based perspective, what should we call the process if we don’t use the term “needs assessment”?

**Tina:** There could be many different terms, but how about “*Assets and Opportunities Assessment*”?

**Question 3:** Can you provide a few examples of the questions an *Assets and Opportunities Assessment* would include?

**Tina:** Here are a few generic questions that could be used in assessing assets and opportunities:

1. What do you aspire to accomplish within the next year, within the next 3 months, within the next 30 days?
2. What goals will move you toward your aspirations?
3. If you were to rank the top three goals to begin working on immediately, what would they be?
4. What do you see as your strengths that will help you to accomplish your goals?
5. What do you see as opportunities to learn or grow that will help you to accomplish your goals?
6. If you could have one tool or piece of information that would be key to your aspirations, what would it be?

### **Curious and want to learn more about *Assets and Opportunities Assessment*?**

Visit the [B2K blog](#) each Wednesday, during the month of May, where Tina and I will convert the generic assessment questions shared above into ones that are applicable to different situations. For example, we'll share ideas for assessing the strengths of families, students, coaching clients, and training participants.

As always, I'm interested in hearing from you, and would love to learn how you have worked from a place of strength. Be sure to visit the [B2K blog](#) and share your stories and adventures in learning about the adults from a strength-based perspective.



Kristie Pretti-Frontczak, Ph.D.  
President, B2K Solutions<sup>SM</sup>, Ltd.

<http://b2kcoach.com>  
[Kristie.B2K@gmail.com](mailto:Kristie.B2K@gmail.com)