

Asking the Right Questions

Introduction

The annual self-assessment process provides program leaders and external advisors with an opportunity to review, analyze, and dialogue about the program's ongoing monitoring results and other data. A dialogue differs from a discussion; a dialogue builds upon each person's contribution, while a discussion is framed to convince others of a particular point of view.

The ongoing monitoring process includes opportunities for monitoring teams to collect, aggregate, and analyze data and engage in dialogue to determine course corrections when needed.

Successful self-assessment processes result in thoughtful recommendations for program improvement and direction. A successful ongoing monitoring process results in monitoring data and measuring outcomes relative to compliance with regulations and progress toward goals and objectives. Dialogues during ongoing monitoring and self-assessment, like other effective dialogues, achieve positive results when participants are open to new ideas, eliminate blame, and encourage others to share their opinions freely.

This tip sheet features dialogue practices self-assessment teams can use as they explore the stories that the data tell and craft recommendations for new directions. Ongoing monitoring teams can also use this tip sheet to help ensure they identify the best possible corrective actions. After recounting insights from inquiry experts, this document provides sample questions program leaders can use to explore the implications of data during ongoing monitoring and self-assessment.

Dialogue Tips from the Experts

For several decades, leaders in organizational development have studied the impact of thoughtful questions on planning and decision-making. We share insights from three experts.

Study “what's good.”

Professor Ron Fry from Case Western Reserve University encourages planning groups to “study what's good if they want to get more good.” In other words, by examining what is going well, planning groups develop insights into ways to apply good practices in new situations. Conversely, focusing on what is wrong usually

produces only incremental change. An expert in the appreciative inquiry method, Professor Fry advises that posing positive questions and encouraging storytelling about successes helps people see the bigger possibilities and go beyond the incremental “tweaks” to truly innovative solutions.

Consider the benefits of “great questions.”

Michael Marquardt, author of *Leading with Questions*, writes about “great questions.” He suggests great questions are selfless and support the work of the group by:

- Creating deep reflection
- Testing assumptions and causing individuals to explore their thoughts
- Enabling the group to better view the situation
- Opening doors to the mind
- Leading to breakthrough thinking

Come to the table with a “learner mindset.”

According to Marilee Adams, president and founder of the Inquiry Institute, when team members participate with a “learner mindset,” they ask great questions that lead to thinking objectively, creating solutions, and relating in a win-win way. She also says that approaching a situation as a learner allows members to become more open to new possibilities and ask questions more effectively. Team members who are in the learner mindset will pose such questions as:

- What possibilities does this open up?
- What can we do about this?
- What can we learn from this?

