my Healthy Organization

Assessment Guide

myhealthyorganization.org

Administered by

RoadMap

Strengthening Organizations.
Advancing Social Justice.

RoadMap recommends this guide to help explain how to use the My Healthy Organization Tool (MHO Assessment Tool) either on your own or with the help of an independent consultant.

The guide describes:

- Why and when to do an assessment.
- How to implement the process and use the assessment tool, including what risks and challenges might come up.
- How to use the process and results to improve your organization.

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1. Features of Movement Capacity Building for Non-Profits

Why and when to do an assessment?

1. What is an organizational assessment tool? How can it help our organization?

Most non-profit organizations are committed to being as effective and successful as possible. An organizational assessment is a tool to spur dialogue among board, staff and constituents about your organization's strengths and challenges at a certain point in time, providing direction and learning for all those involved. A comprehensive assessment process using this tool can help you:

- Better understand strengths and weaknesses across all areas of organizational life and practice.
- Identify where there tends to be agreement or divergence of opinions.
- Promote dialogue and create a safe context to discuss issues that may generally be avoided; swept under the rug; or considered too delicate, provocative or controversial.
- Develop plans and, using the survey as a baseline measure, assist you in tracking implementation and performance over time.
- Envision what a highly effective organization looks like as it evolves, and help you outline a path to address key capacity building goals.

2. Aren't there already so many of these kinds of tools? Why did you develop one more?

Yes, there are several good organizational assessment tools already available. As consultants, Roadmap has worked with many of them. Through our own practice, and with feedback from our peers and clients, we have identified the strengths and weaknesses of several tools for different audiences. But we have also seen three major gaps that these assessment tools are designed to address:

a. **A tool designed for non-profit organizations that represent a hybrid of social services and social change strategies.** Many other assessments are designed with service-oriented organizations in mind, but there are an increasingly large number of organizations that combine social services with social change activities. More “mainstream” assessment tools do not adequately represent these diverse activities, strategies and cultures. The MHO Social Service Assessment Tool was developed with these groups in mind.

b. **A tool specifically tailored for “movement-building” organizations.** For organizations primarily engaged in community organizing, base building, leadership development and advocacy, the content and terminology of many existing assessment tools are usually unable to capture the more qualitative elements of constituent leadership development and community accountability, and the context of race, power, class, generation, language, gender and sexual orientation. At its worst, using mainstream tools can be a jarring and disorienting experience. The authors of the MHO Social Change Assessment Tool hope this tool more accurately speaks the language and captures the work common to these groups.

c. **Tools that help strengthen organizations through a thoughtful process.** In our experience, tools are often used in a vacuum, absent thoughtful attention to process. They can raise the expectation of a “quick fix,” or worse, result in unintended consequences or situations that the organization is unprepared to handle. As consultants interested in strengthening social change organizations, we believe the process is every bit as important as the tool itself. This process guide outlines steps for how you approach and prepare for this assessment—how it is interpreted, why you are doing it, who participates, and how it is connected to other organizational processes. These tools and guide are designed to spur ongoing, dynamic organizational learning as much as produce a formal assessment of the organization at a certain point in time.

In addition these tools are unique in providing analysis through a web platform. You have the option of having all participants fill out the tool through our website. You will then receive an analysis, based on a compilation of all results, that explains your organization level of development in various areas or organizational life, areas of strength and weakness, and other helpful guidance.

3. These tools look complicated! Over 50 elements and four levels! Wouldn't a simple checklist or "yes/no/maybe" format suffice?

We understand your reaction! As we mentioned, we reviewed many different tools before we came up with this design. As consultants, RoadMap's number one priority is to **keep things simple and smart**. We know that the more complicated and lengthy the process is, the less likely it is that people will do it, so a short and sweet checklist might seem attractive. However, in our experience, a quick checklist is also likely to be superficial and not give you the information you really need. Though this format may appear daunting, we hope that the "taking of it" will be as educational as the eventual findings.

It may be helpful for you to understand generally what each level **qualitatively** means to us. We use four levels to describe organizational practice along a spectrum that changes as an organization moves through its "life cycle." Your organization may be at a "Level 4" in some areas and "Level 1 or 2" in other areas. We hope the levels point to a direction the organization can pursue to strengthen each area.

Level 1: Generally corresponds to a small, young, start up organization, or an internal area that you have not yet focused on. Tends to be volunteer-run or with a small staff. Driven by a passionate vision, high energy and a committed small group. Sometimes a bit loose or ad hoc, with informal processes and practices. May be more spontaneous and reactive.

Level 2: A bit more structured. Gives minimal attention to planning. Basic awareness of and intention regarding planning, program, organizational design, at least by a few people. Processes still often informal or inconsistent.

Level 3: More organization-wide and shared awareness, intention, cross-program understanding, and consistent practice. Higher level of stability, increased awareness of internal and external factors, and commitment to long-term existence. Moderate level of capacity and structure in place.

Level 4: High performing, effective organization. Roles and processes are clear, skills and resources match organizational needs. Practices and policies are written, transparent, understood, and consistently implemented organization-wide. Strategic and proactive thinking and commitment to leadership development at all levels is a priority.

We see the use of these four levels as important for the following reason:

Often when an assessment merely asks you to rank something as "excellent, good, poor" (or some variation)—it is impossible for people to collectively and objectively agree on what those rankings actually mean. Here, instead, we have tried to provide you with a specific description—evidence—of what the organization would need to have in place to rank itself at levels 1-4. In this way, you can also see what practices or policies are missing and what it would take to move to the next level. Keep in mind this is imperfect and not scientific (see section below called "Are there 'right' answers?"). But we have attempted, based on generally agreed upon organizational practice and our own experience, to delineate the characteristics that may be evident as an organization moves towards Level 4.

In sum, the levels demonstrate a progression from more informality and less structure around intention, awareness, long term planning, methodology of practice, and organizational infrastructure. In some ways, that suggests that Level 4 may be the "picture of success," but it is important to remember that there is a correspondence between these stages of development and the "life cycle" of your organization.

4. What do you mean by "life cycle"?

Organizations go through different life cycles just like people do.

Various practitioners describe the stages of development differently, but one example from Carlson and Donohoe is: 1) Start up, 2) Development, 3) Expansion/ Growth, Maturity, 4) Crises/Renewal structure OR 5) Decline and Closing. Each of these life stages carries with it certain characteristics.

There is much more to say on this subject, but for our purposes, we want to emphasize a few points:

- Not all organizations move through all of these stages, nor do they move through them at the same pace. There is no predetermined timeframe and the sequencing and rate varies. The process is often non linear and forward motion is not inevitable.

- Most organizations, when they read the conditions or characteristics associated with a particular stage, feel they are “a little bit of this and a little bit of that.” They may be in transition between stages or different aspects of the organization may be in several different stages at the same time. This is normal.

- Each stage may be appropriate for where your particular organization locates itself. In other words, being “further along” on the cycle is not necessarily “better.” The pace is unpredictable and influenced by many factors.

Therefore, as you work with the assessment, **your ranking of various elements should be considered in light of your own organization’s life cycle.** A very young organization should reasonably expect to primarily have 1’s and 2’s. A more established organization may have mostly 3’s and 4’s, but some aspects of organizational practice may still be very informal and unstructured, resulting in a lower rank.

Finally, **a life cycle understanding provides perspective about your own organization’s evolution, rather than comparing it to others.** Understanding your “score” in the context of the life cycle helps you determine what reasonable changes are and the appropriate kinds of capacity that you want to prioritize at this time.

5. Is there a “right” time to conduct an assessment like this? What are the readiness factors we should consider?

Given the busy lives of non-profit organizations, it may never feel like the “right” time to take a holistic and long-term look at organizational effectiveness. But for organizations committed to ongoing learning and improvement, it is essential that time and resources are occasionally carved out for activities such as this assessment process and the goal setting that emerges from it.

The essential *starting point* is that there is **designated leadership** who will cheerlead this process, keep up the momentum, and make the process relevant to the organization's efforts to improve itself.

Second, make sure you are going to be able to take the **time to do this well.** See Section 7c below for a sample 8-week timeline. If the organization is going through a particularly busy, chaotic or unstable period, it is unlikely that you will have time to conduct the assessment in a patient and thorough way. It may be viewed by staff or board as an unnecessary distraction and be treated with resentment or indifference. Choose a time of year your organization has some breathing room, without conflicts with other significant community events.

Third, **link the assessment to strategic planning and transition times:** An assessment process such as this can be a useful starting point if you are about to embark on strategic planning, are organizing a significant board/staff retreat, preparing for leadership transitions or are considering bringing an organizational development consultant on board to address a number of areas. The process can bring everyone up to speed on elements in the organization they may be less familiar with, help the group identify priorities, key strategic issues or challenges, and set a logical plan of action. The findings can also help establish a common foundation of organizational strengths and what areas need particular attention.

Fourth, it may be helpful to conduct an assessment such as this when you are about to experience significant organizational change—such as creating or changing key staff positions; considering restructuring; or headed towards expansion, contraction, or a possible merger. Most of all, we hope the assessment tool is a jumping off point for dialogue to build common goals and steps towards being a more effective and healthier organization and ultimately, a stronger social change movement.

6. OK, I can see the potential benefits. Are there any risks or challenges we should be aware of?

Yes. Some of the factors of readiness that we mentioned above should be considered in order to avoid apathy, resentment, or an unproductive process.

Perhaps the most important risk has to do with trust and confidentiality. This process will only be as useful as the degree of honesty that people bring to it. For some staff, this may be the first time they are being asked for their opinions on issues relevant to parts of the organization outside of their own program. They may not understand the questions or may worry that there will be repercussions if they respond “critically.”

We will say more below about the options of individual versus group assessment processes but whatever structure you use, it is essential that people are assured of the confidentiality of their responses and that all opinions will be respected. (Regarding confidentiality, we generally recommend that assessment data is summarized without names, and if quotes are shared they are not attributed by name but rather used to illustrate meaningful points.)

Implementing the Process – Frequently Asked Questions

1. How do we begin? Who should be involved?

This assessment can **be self guided or facilitated** by someone from the outside. In either case, it is important to determine **whose input you would like and why**. We recommend broad and deep participation, reflecting the size of your organization, the purpose of the assessment, and how the assessment fits in the regular input and decision making process. If feasible, ask all staff, board members, and a sampling of clients and other stakeholders who know your organization very well. You will also need to decide if the MHO Social Change or Social Service Assessment Tool is the right one for you.

If the assessment must be limited to only a few key "managers" or organizational leaders, that is fine too, but provide a rationale for this limited process and the people you have selected. If you do go broad, keep in mind that many of the questions require knowledge of the day-to-day workings internal to your organization (as compared to more general surveys or interviews that may be part of a strategic planning scan). Some people may find it hard to answer meaningfully outside of their direct areas of responsibility so encourage them to answer where they do feel knowledgeable.

You will also want to keep in mind **what kind of support or training** will be needed to make sure everyone understands the purpose and content of the assessment and what is expected of them. Remember—this is as much about creating dialogue and organization-wide learning as it is about "scoring" any particular system, practice or policy. Use this opportunity to educate each other about practices and language that may not be familiar or obvious to everyone. The training does not have to be extensive but enough to help everyone feel that they can engage and provide valuable input.You will also need to determine **how people will administer the assessment** (web-based or manually) and how to pace the process using individual, small group, and large group settings.

2. Do we facilitate this on our own or with outside help? What are the pros and cons?

First, let us begin by saying that we are committed to processes that can be self-managed by organizations. There is definite value to bringing consultants in for all sorts of reasons, but this process does not require outside help. And, even when Roadmap consultants are appropriately engaged, our goal is to find ways to transfer our expertise to the organization and help them make plans into "living documents" so that practices are shared among many people and become institutionalized within the organization. Here are some factors to consider about whether or not to do the assessment on your own or with outside help.

Benefits of outside support

- A degree of confidentiality and objectivity that is hard to find with in-house staff or board. This applies to the facilitation of the overall process, answering people's questions or concerns, mediating conflicts, and especially to reading and interpreting the data.
- Skills and expertise that staff may not have.
- Another set of hands – labor, time, and attention – that busy staff people often can not prioritize for this purpose.
- A consultant who is part of an ongoing strategic planning or organizational development process can facilitate the assessment as a starting point, representing a seamless holder of the pieces, findings, priorities, and changes over time.

Benefits to a self-guided process

- It is less expensive than paying someone else.
- Doing it "on your own" and teaching yourselves often helps build internal capacity for this kind of practice in the long run.

- You have total control if there is no third party who has to be managed, oriented, and held accountable/accounted to.

There can be a good combination that draws on the advantage of both methods. If some funds are available, consider a way to divide up the duties and roles that makes the most sense. You might use a consultant as a coach to the leaders of the process instead of actually running the process.

Most of the instructions below apply to either scenario. However, in order to provide a clear explanation, we will describe the process as if a consultant were in the picture. However, an internal leader can play much the same role.

3. How much time will this take? What might a timeline look like?

Many factors—including how many people participate, and whether or not you work with an outside consultant—influence the length of time the process can take.

Overall, the process will likely unfold over 7 stages. We highly recommend that you dedicate time (from a few days to one week) to each stage. As a general rule, each participant needs to allocate about 45 minutes to learn about and complete the assessment. Additional time is needed from the internal team who will prepare everyone for the process; analyze the results; and present reports back to the wider board and staff. A consultant's role and scope would vary from background orientation to the tool to fully leading the process.

Stage 1

- Convene key people.
- Determine need and purpose for tool.
- Review various tools, (choose this one!).
- Decide if you will self-administer the tool or with outside person.

Stage 2

- Hire outside person if necessary (identify, interview, share tool, see if good fit, etc).
- Begin introducing concept.
- *May take longer than 1-2 weeks longer to contract with a qualified and available consultant).

Stage 3

- Orient consultant
- Convene deeper discussion of purpose, process, roles, timeline.

Stage 4

- Agree on process and participants, communicate to everyone.
- Set date for launch.
- Account owner signs the organization up.
- Account owner invites participants.

Stage 5

- Participants complete survey by set date.

Stage 6

- Reports produced through MHO, once everyone has completed the assessment.
- Short report to board/staff.

- Identify significant findings about rankings, patterns, themes, strategic issues in need of attention, and sample, illustrative quotes.

Stage 7

- Present findings (first to lead team, then to full group).
- Discuss and agree on action steps/plans for moving forward and addressing concerns.
- Insure that maximum time is given to these discussions. May require two sessions.

4. What instructions do we give to everyone about how to “score?”

Tell people to select the description that best describes your organization’s performance. We know it is difficult to quantify these things. You are likely to discover that, with some elements, your organization will not fully match any of the descriptions. In these instances, simply identify the description that is most suitable for your organization based on your own perception/experience. There is space and opportunity for remarks where you can elaborate. Your honesty is essential. It is important that you assess the organization’s **current state** rather than a desired state you are working toward.

Are there “right” answers? There are no right or wrong answers to the questions. Your response is your perception at this time. Remember—each of us sits in a different place in the organization, has a different history with it, and interacts with different people within and outside the organization. We also come from different backgrounds and that inevitably shapes our expectations and perceptions.

Indeed, one value of the assessment is not only to see where there is significant consensus about organizational capacity in certain areas, but also to note the points of **greatest divergence.** Often there is more to learn by analyzing the reasons underlying different rankings than those that are generally in alignment.

Also, we know that some of us are optimists and others are pessimists. Our organizations consist of “glass half empty” people and “glass half full” people. Some hold themselves and each other to excruciatingly high standards or have more practical experiences to judge others by (or think they do!), whereas others are more easily satisfied with the “status quo” or at an earlier level of their own professional development. Understanding why people perceive things differently is often an important clue to issues of power, access, and perception in the organization. That alone may offer clues as to how to improve internal communication and a sense of inclusion or fairness so as to make your organization healthier.

How to use the process and results to improve your organization

1. What is the end product? How to interpret it? When are we "finished"?

Once everyone has completed the assessment, the Account Owner (the person who originally signed the organization up and invited participants to complete the survey) should go back in to MHO to produce a report that can then be shared with everyone. MHO can automatically generate reports that include:

- Average total scores for each of the 8 categories with an analysis that clearly identifies your organization's level of development in that area.

- Scores for each of the individual questions within each section.

- Alignment and divergence scales to show where there is agreement and disagreement within the organization.

- A list of all narrative responses by question, randomized to maintain confidentiality. The report should be shared with the lead facilitators, and then with the people who took the assessment, and in a special meeting (or series of meetings). Someone should facilitate a group discussion about the report.

Depending on your overall purpose for the assessment—whether it is seen as a one-time activity, or part of a longer organizational development process—the group should choose the top priorities to address, and from there begin to develop specific action plans for the coming months or year. This is especially useful if integrated with other annual planning so that these organizational goals dovetail into existing work plans (identifying who is going to work on what by when, with what desired outcomes).

2. **How do we keep the information alive?**

   The organization should establish a time to check in on the goals that emerge from the assessment, to evaluate progress and results, and determine when it is time to address other items prioritized.

   The goal is to use the report and the questions raised in the assessment as a dynamic and living tool to provide organizational guidance, direction, and ongoing improvements and growth. Of course many organizations undergo rapid and varied changes so some of the information may be outdated within a year or two. The assessment tool may come in handy again and again over the group's life cycle.

3. **Should we share this information with anyone else, such as our funders?**

   Once upon a time there was a belief that it was not wise to share any "negative" information with funders about your organizational health. There was fear that you would be penalized for not having everything in tiptop shape, or critics might use your weaknesses against the organization. There can be a feverish goal to proclaim adherence to "best practices" whether true or not and whether they are feasible all the time or appropriate for your organization's development or not.

   Fortunately that thinking has significantly shifted. Many funders now better understand the stresses and natural challenges that social change organizations face, and believe that an investment in legitimate capacity building is every bit as important as grants to support programmatic work. Funder alliances such as Grantmakers for Effective Organizations have supported research, tool development, and a number of efforts to help organizations honestly assess and improve their internal operations. And many funders will provide resources (direct funding, provision of consultants, etc.) to support capacity building.

   The fact that an organization is undertaking an assessment process is now seen as a sign of organizational health and maturity by most funders, allies and peers. You don't need to feel that you have to share every detail of the findings from this assessment, but we also feel it is appropriate and positive – especially with your long time supporters in whom you trust – to let them know you are doing this, to share some of the key findings with them, and to request financial support to address the challenges and build on the strengths.

Good luck with the assessment tool and process. Our RoadMap consultants are eager to hear from you. For our team, the evaluation of this tool and learning about how it has worked for you is as important a step as the months that led up to our developing and launching it. We welcome your honest and practical feedback so that we can find ways to improve the content and practice of this tool.

My Healthy Organization is a program of RoadMap, which offers other capacity building and coaching services to nonprofits. Check out our website, www.roadmapconsulting.org for additional resources and a list of services.

How to use the process and results to improve your organization

1. Features of Movement Capacity Building for Nonprofits

There have been significant resources dedicated to the development of nonprofits' organizational capacity. However, far less attention has been paid to the capacity of groups to support movement for social change. Below are nine areas the Project identified as important building blocks of movement capacity of nonprofit organizations.

Vision

The organization has a statement of the world it wants to create and a theory of how change is made, including the role the organization plays in the larger social change arena and to whom the organization views itself as accountable.

Principles

Based on its vision of social change, the organization develops values that are applied within and outside of the organization.

Learning and Reflecting

The organization allocates time for its staff and constituents to learn and reflect on the organizational vision through presentations, readings, discussions, or arts/culture. The organization reflects on its work in order to refine its vision and strategies.

Issues of Race and Power

The organization considers society's "dominant culture" and how this culture is, often unconsciously, replicated within the organization itself. The organization analyzes how the effects of race, class, gender, and other cultural factors impact its work.

Work Across Boundaries

The organization builds relationships with other agencies, groups, and individuals to create a movement, and supports other groups without trying to "own" every issue or campaign.

Work Across Generations

The organization has a mechanism for transferring trust, power, and responsibility from older leaders to younger ones, while educating younger leaders about the complexities of social change work and inspiring their involvement in these issues.

Constituent Involvement

The organization has a mechanism by which to promote meaningful constituent involvement that goes beyond just staff, board and funders. The organization also directs resources toward constituency involvement, within and outside of the organization.

Structure

The organization creates a system of effective leadership, management, and accountability while remaining creative and flexible in internal and external problem-solving. The agency collaborates with other organizations to bring about social change.

Funding

The organization recognizes and has transparency about the impact that funders' priorities have on the organization's work. The organization also examines how to maintain accountability to its constituents, particularly when funding comes from sources other than the organization's constituent base.