



Tip Sheet: Asking the Right Questions

Introduction

The annual Self-Assessment (SA) process provides program leaders and external advisors with an opportunity to review, analyze, and dialogue about the program's Ongoing Monitoring (OGM) 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 (OGM) process includes opportunities for monitoring teams to collect, aggregate, and analyze data and engage in dialogue to determine course corrections when needed.

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

This tip sheet features dialogue practices that SA teams can use as they explore the stories that the data tell and craft recommendations for new directions. OGM 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 that program leaders can use to explore the implications of data during OGM and SA.

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 current 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 Appreciative Inquiry, 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 that 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?



Using Questions to Analyze Ongoing Monitoring Data

As they review OGM data, program leaders are usually laser focused on the issues that need to be corrected. Ron Fry, however, advises that program leaders may be more successful if they initially approach the problem from a strength-based perspective. The example below illustrates how program leaders can effectively use great questions to examine issues identified during OGM. The five steps incorporate examples of great questions. Notice that the OGM steps are important to an internal correction process and get to the heart of the matter quickly:

Step 1: Lead with strengths.

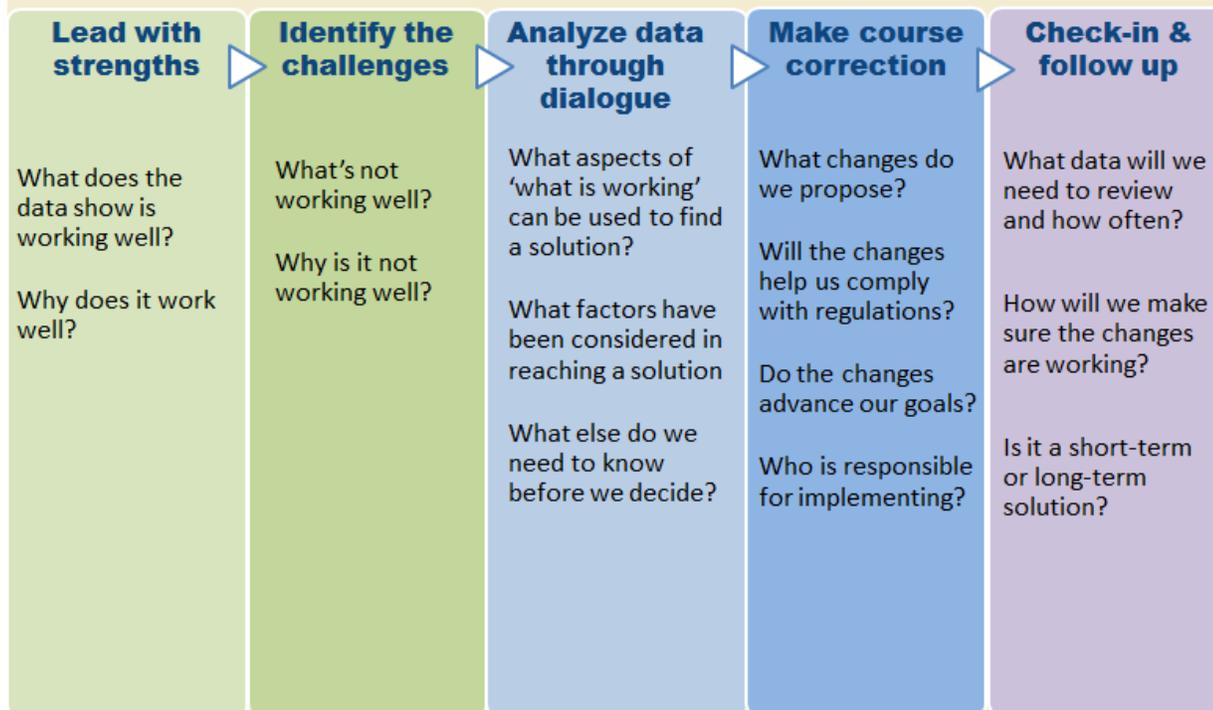
Step 2: Identify the challenge.

Step 3: Analyze data through dialogue.

Step 4: Make course corrections.

Step 5: Check-in and follow-up.

Asking the Right Questions OGM





Using Questions During the Self-Assessment

SA requires a “big picture” focus and requires programs to measure program effectiveness and progress in meeting program goals and objectives. During the SA, the five steps take on a new look with questions that prompt higher-level thinking. The five steps incorporate examples of great questions. Notice that SA steps support the work of diverse teams whose members are discussing multi-source and multi-year data to arrive at recommendations:

Step 1: Lead with strengths.

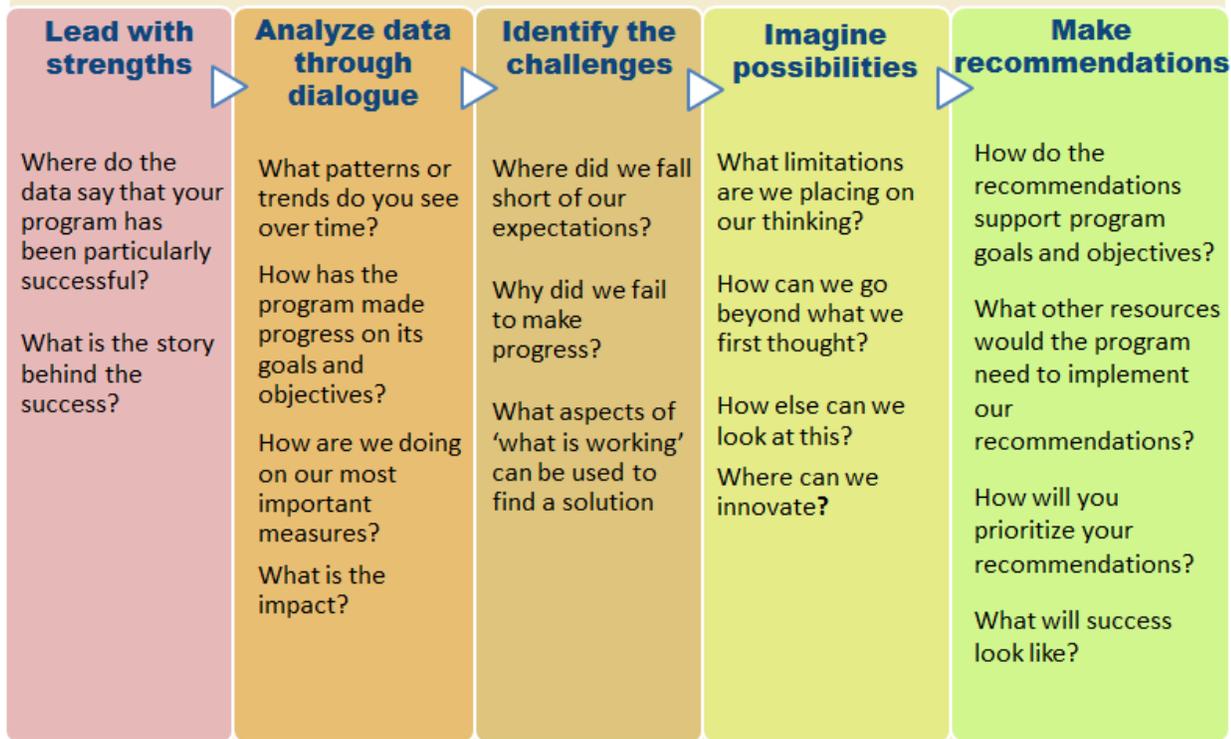
Step 2: Analyze data through dialogue.

Step 3: Identify challenges.

Step 4: Imagine the possibilities.

Step 5: Make recommendations.

Asking the Right Questions SA





Recommended Resources

1. Marquardt, Michael. (2005). *Leading with Questions: How Leaders Find the Right Solutions by Knowing What to Ask*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
2. Fry, Ron. (2012). *Asking the Right Questions*. A video prepared under Grant #90CHC0006 for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Head Start by the National Center on Program Management and Fiscal Operations.
3. Fry, Ron. (2013). *Leading from Strengths*. A video prepared under Grant #90CHC0006 for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Head Start by the National Center on Program Management and Fiscal Operations.