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:

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**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.

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**Asking the Right Questions OGM**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Lead with strengths</th>
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<th>Check-in &amp; follow up</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What does the data show is working well?</td>
<td>What’s not working well? Why is it not working well?</td>
<td>What aspects of ‘what is working’ can be used to find a solution? What factors have been considered in reaching a solution? What else do we need to know before we decide?</td>
<td>What changes do we propose? Will the changes help us comply with regulations? Do the changes advance our goals? Who is responsible for implementing?</td>
<td>What data will we need to review and how often? How will we make sure the changes are working? Is it a short-term or long-term solution?</td>
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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.

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**Asking the Right Questions SA**

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<tr>
<td>Where do the data say that your program has been particularly successful?</td>
<td>What patterns or trends do you see over time?</td>
<td>Where did we fall short of our expectations?</td>
<td>What limitations are we placing on our thinking?</td>
<td>How do the recommendations support program goals and objectives?</td>
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<td>What is the story behind the success?</td>
<td>How has the program made progress on its goals and objectives?</td>
<td>Why did we fail to make progress?</td>
<td>How can we go beyond what we first thought?</td>
<td>What other resources would the program need to implement our recommendations?</td>
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<td>What are we doing on our most important measures?</td>
<td>What aspects of “what is working” can be used to find a solution</td>
<td>What is the impact?</td>
<td>How else can we look at this?</td>
<td>How will you prioritize your recommendations?</td>
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<td>What will success look like?</td>
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Recommended Resources

