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A Guide to Assessment Using the CAPRA Community Problem Solving Model

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What is Assessment?

Assessment is the final stage of the CAPRA model. In the assessment stage, we find out how well our response has worked and make changes if necessary.

In other words, assessment is a way of seeing if our problem solving response is doing what we think it will do. One way to think of assessment is as a "grade" of how well our response worked.

For example, a community is dealing with the problem of vandalism. Using the CAPRA model the community develops a response to vandalism. It makes good sense, given all of the time and effort put in to the solution, that the community looks at the effect of that solution.

Why do we do Assessment?

You may be wondering why an assessment of our CAPRA responses to a village problem may be necessary. There are four main reasons.

First of all, assessment helps us understand how our CAPRA response to the problem is working.

- At any point in the life of a program or project, it is always necessary to know if the project is doing what it set out to do.
- By doing an evaluation of the response we came up with using CAPRA, we can find out how well that response is working and what improvements are needed.
- Monitoring our response while it is being put into action will make help make sure that the plan is being followed.
- Community problem solving using the CAPRA model is about making changes in the village. By going through the process of assessment, we are able to find out if things have changed because of our solution.
- In the assessment process we can also learn about the reasons for the success or failure of your solution. In other words assessment lets us know why a response did or did not work. By doing assessment, we are able to learn from the successes and failures of our responses so that we won't repeat them in the future.

For Example:

Your village has been facing a problem with vandalism. Windows in the school have recently been broken, as have the lights surrounding the runway at the airport. You have developed a response to this problem using the CAPRA problem solving method. It has been a month or so since you put your plan into action. You are interested in how well your response has worked.

A second reason for doing assessment is that it allows us to show the Tribal Council and those who are funding our CAPRA problem solving responses what we are doing.

- The reality of limited dollars to operate programs requires that you show those funding your work what you are doing.
- Taking part in the CAPRA assessment process introduces accountability to those who are responsible for solving a problem. Although funding can be obtained on a short term basis to deal with a problem, unless the response can be shown to have some success, it is likely that funding will taken away.
- The Tribal Council has a right to expect that the responses developed using the CAPRA problem solving method will have some success. Because of this, it is necessary to have a way to show them how well the CAPRA response is working.

For Example:

The government may have to cut back on funding some projects. Your vandalism prevention project that combines the work of the local police, community Elders, social workers and sports coaches has been very effective. You need next year's funding to achieve your goals.

By having evaluation information, the organization funding your program can easily make decisions based on facts about your program.

The third reason why assessment is important is that it allows us to show other villages what has worked in our village.

- A response to a problem may have been a big success. Now other communities want to know what we did and how we did it. By describing what happened in a project or program, other people can learn from our experiences and adapt them to their village.
- In a sense, a properly done assessment gives us a way to share our successes with other villages. It also shows them that, with planning and cooperative effort, community problems can be solved

For Example:

Vandalism was a big problem in your village. Using the CAPRA model, your team developed a program in which recreational activities for village kids were increased. Within a year's time, the vandalism in the village was rare. Now, other villages that face a similar problem want to know about how you were able to greatly reduce the problem of vandalism in your village.

With a complete assessment, you can share your success with these other villages.

The fourth reason to conduct assessments is to show those delivering community services that their efforts are making a difference in the village.

- Community service delivery persons who are a part of CAPRA solutions need to see their work in a larger picture. These people come face to face with village problems on a day to day basis. It is helpful to them to know that their work is making a difference.
- By completing an assessment, we can show them the good work that they are doing.

For Example:

The staff who run the recreational activities are faced, on a day to day basis with many problems. They have to deal with kids who have lots of troubles. Some of the kids are unruly and don't listen. Other kids suffer mistreatment at home, arriving at the recreational activities hungry and without proper clothing for cold weather conditions. This endless stream of problem kids can make the staff question the need for or adequacy of their services.

With a complete assessment, you can show the recreational staff that their efforts are making a difference in reducing the vandalism problem.

Assessment = Documentation + Evaluation

There are two main parts to any assessment under the CAPRA model: documentation and evaluation.

Documentation, as the name suggests, is the part of assessment in which the activities of the CAPRA problem solving process are recorded. As a part of the assessment, all of the steps taken to arrive at a response, from the identification of clients, to the analysis of the problem, and the identification of partners are documented.

In the evaluation portion of the assessment process, the results of the problem solving response are considered. When doing evaluation, we look to see if the responses developed using the CAPRA model worked as well as we hoped they would.

Documentation

What is it?

In the documentation part of the assessment, we record the activities of those who are using CAPRA to solve a problem in the village. All activities in each step of the CAPRA process should be documented. This will include a record of:

- who the clients are and how they were selected,
- what the problem is and how it was identified in the analysis stage,
- who the partners are and how they were selected,
- what the response is and how it was arrived at, and
- the findings of the evaluation completed during the assessment stage of CAPRA.

Why is Documentation Necessary?

Documentation of our responses is important because it allows us to share them with others who might be having similar problems

Sometime in the future we might have a similar problem. If we have good documentation, we can look back for a solution without "reinventing the wheel".

Having documentation lets us share with new clients and partners our previous responses to problems.

What is the Best Way to Document our Assessment?

Documentation of the assessment can be done in many ways. These methods include:

- written reports
- video tapes
- tape recordings
- notes (forms)
- drawings
- photographs
- charts and graphs

It is best to use more than one method to document our assessments. It is best if we have a written report because written documents are easier to copy and share with others and are less expensive to produce and reproduce.

By documenting each step of the CAPRA process, you are able to monitor how well things are working. Monitoring each step to ensure our CAPRA responses have been properly implemented will often tell us why they succeeded or failed. Monitoring tells us how we are doing and may help us to make changes during implementation if some parts of the process are having problems. This is much preferable to simply doing a post-mortem after a program has failed.

Evaluation

In the evaluation stage of CAPRA assessment, we look to see if our response was effective.

The effectiveness of the solution developed in the response stage of the CAPRA model is determined by the goals and objectives developed in the analysis stage of CAPRA. In other words, we have to be clear about our goals and objectives in order to complete a proper evaluation.

When do we do Evaluation?

Evaluation should not only be seen as a kind of 'report card' to be given after the project has been implemented. Rather, the evaluation process should help to identify strengths and weaknesses during a response's implementation in order to improve it. Ideally, evaluation is an ongoing activity that should be first considered when a program is being planned and carried out throughout the entire time of a program's operation.

Depending upon the problem and our goals, evaluation can be done at any time. If the solution is a one-time event, the evaluation can be done right after the event. However, if the solution to the problem is carried out over time, the measures of whether we are meeting our objectives can be taken on a periodic basis while the solution is being carried out.

Choosing Goals and Objectives

Goals are the things that we are trying to accomplish when dealing the underlying causes of the problem. They describe what we are planning to do with our response.

Goals can range from problem elimination or reduction; reduction of harm/impact; improvement of response and reallocation of responsibility.

It is important to work toward proactive rather than reactive responses. As was discussed in earlier CAPRA training, being reactive is like pulling bodies out of the river downstream whereas being proactive is like going upstream to stop the person throwing bodies in the river.

For Example:

In the analysis stage, the vandalism problem was boiled down to two underlying causes: the lack of activities for kids, and a lack of pride in the village. Based upon this analysis, three goals were put forth:

1. Reduce the amount of vandalism in the village.
2. Increasing the number of activities for kids.
3. Making residents proud of the village.

Once our goals are put forth, we next need to develop objectives to measure those goals in order to do an evaluation. Objectives are identifiable and measurable actions or activities that are to be completed in a specific time period.

Objectives can describe all kinds of activities. They should be specific, measurable and be time limited. They should have the following three elements:

- State specifically the result we expect
- State this in terms we can measure
- Identify when the results will happen

For Example:

If the goals identified in the CAPRA analysis stage are to reduce vandalism, increase the number of activities for kids, and to make residents proud of the village, it is necessary to develop objectives to measure those goals.

Goal 1: Reduce the amount of vandalism in the village

Objective 1: Reduce the number of reports of vandalism by 50 percent in the next year.

Goal 2: Increasing the number of activities for kids.

Objective 1: Increase the number of kids taking part in activities by 40 percent over the next year.

Objective 2: Increase the number of activities by 25 percent in the next 6 months.

Goal 3: Make residents proud of their village.

Objective 1: Increase the pride of village residents over the next 2 years.

Objective 2: Increase village residents' feelings of satisfaction with village life over the next two years.

Measuring our Objectives

Once we have chosen our objectives, we next need to find ways of measuring those objectives. When doing an evaluation of CAPRA responses, there are three main ways of measuring objectives. We can examine records produced for the project or from official agencies, we can conduct surveys, or we can run focus groups.

Records Examination

One place to look for measures of our objectives is the records that are kept especially for the problem response. Another place to look for these measures is at the records produced by official agencies that deal with the problem on a day to day basis. Both of these types of records are good for evaluation because they are easily produced and can be tailored to measure our objectives.

When we are setting our goals and objectives, sometimes almost by design we are forced to keep records on the efforts we are making to solve a problem. These records might include the number of clients served by a program or the number of people taking part in an activity.

> **For Example:**
>
> An organization has a goal to increase the number of kids taking part in after-school activities and an objective was to increase the number of kids taking part in those activities by 40 percent over the next year.
>
> The best way to measure this increase is to keep records on the number of kids taking part in activities each day. To do this, the organization might count and write down the number of kids who took part each day. Or, they might have the kids write their names on a sign-in sheet to take part in the activities. By doing this, the organization would have a complete count of the program participation and would know if they met their objective and their goal.

In other cases, official agencies that are responsible for dealing with a problem will keep records that can be examined to see if we are meeting our objectives. Almost any agency in a village should have this type of records. Schools have records about attendance and their students, Village health aides have records about cases they have attended to, and the local public safety officials have records about calls for service they have responded to.

When making our goals, it is wise to consult with our partners to find out what type of records they keep to measure our objectives.

For Example:

An organization has a goal to reduce the amount of vandalism in its village. To see if they have met this goal, they put forth the objective of reducing the number of reports of vandalism by 50 percent in the next year.

The organization then turns to its partners to find out what kinds of records they keep that might be used to measure that objective. Some of the partners say that they have records that might be of use:

> The School keeps records of repairs made for vandalism,
>
> The Public Safety Officer has records on the number of report of vandalism,
>
> The Village Housing Corporation has records on the number of broken windows and doors they repair,

All of these records could be used to find out if the organization has met the objective of having a 50 percent reduction in vandalism, thereby meeting its goal of reducing vandalism in the village.

When examining records to see if we have met our objectives, it is important that we establish a "benchmark" before the program is started so that we can compare how things were before with what happened because of the program. In other words, we cannot measure the difference our program made if we do not know where we started.

Surveys

Another way of finding out if we have met our objectives is to do surveys. They can be done for just about any purpose; most objectives can be measured with a survey. In a survey, questions can be printed up and handed out to those people we want to respond to read and complete, or we can verbally ask people questions and record their answers ourselves. Either way, the questions we ask in surveys are a great way to see if we have met our objectives.

A great type of survey to conduct is the "before and after" survey. These can be conducted to see if there is a change in what people know, in what people do, or in what people feel. By asking the same questions before a program is started and then after it is completed we can find out if the program met our objectives.

For Example:

One of the goals identified in the CAPRA analysis stage by the organization wanting to deal with the vandalism problem in its community was to make its residents proud of their village. Their objective for this goal was to increase village pride over the period of two years.

Because there are no records on "village pride," it is necessary to find another way to measure that objective. The organization decided to put together a survey to ask village residents about their pride in their village. Before starting their programs against vandalism, the organization asked each adult in the community questions about their pride in the village. These questions included:

Q1: True or False. I am proud to say that I am from this village.

Q2: True or False. This village is a good place to live.

Q3: True or False. People from other villages talk about how well things work in our village.

Then, after the program had been running for two years, the organization again asked the adults in the village the very same questions. By comparing the differences in the number of people who answered true in the "before" survey with the number of people who answered true in the "after" survey, the organization was able to see how much village pride had grown.

When developing a survey, a number of things must be considered to make sure the survey provides the best possible result. Among others, we need to know up front:

- Who will complete the survey?
- How the survey will be completed (by the surveyor or by the person we want to get information from)?
- What types of questions will be used (open or close ended questions)?

Surveys are a great tool to use when looking for changes in peoples' behavior. Sometimes, the types of behavior we want to change do not show up in official agency records because people are afraid to report the behavior to the proper authorities. In some villages, for example, people are afraid to report crimes to the public safety officers. As a result, a program designed to reduce the amount of crime in those villages might not be able to use official agency records because of underreporting to those agencies.

To get around the problem of underreporting, it might be best to use a survey. In a survey we can ask people about things that happened to them that they might not have been willing to share with official agencies such as public safety departments. In other words, surveys can be used to deal with the problem of underreporting.

Focus Groups

The third way we have for gathering information to measure our objectives is the focus group. In a focus group, individuals are brought together and led in a group discussion about a topic. During focus groups, the researcher / group leader asks specific questions and guides the discussion to insure that the questions are covered.

Focus groups are a great tool for measuring objectives when the other ways cannot be used. This is especially true when we are trying to measure changes in peoples' feelings about a subject.

In one sense, focus groups are a method that is especially well suited for measuring objectives in Alaska Native villages. They are similar to traditional methods such as "talking circles" for considering ideas. In the focus group, the researcher / group leader works to make sure that everyone from the group gets a chance to make their feelings and opinions heard and that no one's voice is left out.

One of the main benefits of the focus group is that it works to get people thinking about a topic in depth, which really helps to bring out rich responses. For instance, one focus group member might mention something in answering a question which will, in turn, get the other members thinking along the same lines and allowing them to add to the answer. In other words, the focus group members "feed off of" the answers of other members which ultimately leads to a group response that gets to the heart of the matter.

For Example:

One of the objectives identified by the organization dealing with the vandalism problem was to increase village residents' feelings of satisfaction with village life after a program had been in place for two years.

Because peoples' feelings are sometimes hard to measure with surveys, the organization decided to use a focus group to see if their program had actually increased satisfaction with village life. To do this, they brought together a group of 8 village residents for a focus group.

The group discussion began with the question: "is it more satisfying to live in this village today than it was two years ago?" Once all of the group members agreed that it was more satisfying, the focus group leader began asking for specific examples of things that made it more satisfying. Each response given by a group member led to an additional response by other group members and, by the time the focus group meeting was completed, it was clear that there were good reasons why the village was a more satisfying place to live than it was before and that one of the main reasons for that was the organization's anti-vandalism programs.

The mechanics of putting together focus groups are fairly straightforward. A focus group should have no fewer than 5 and no more than 10 people participating in it. The focus group members should have some sort of similar background characteristics. If, for example, we wanted to find out how attitudes toward a certain community agency had changed, we might bring together the clients of that agency for a focus group. Likewise, if there were a number of people working in a village who were all responsible for dealing with a problem, we could bring those people together for a focus group to get their feelings and perspectives on that problem.

Who Should Be Involved in the Evaluation?

The general rule about involving others in the evaluation of a program or project is the same rule we have for choosing partners for putting together a response to a community problem. The more people we have involved in the evaluation, even if they are only kept informed of what is going on in the process, the better the evaluation will turn out. Each of the partners of your response should be involved at all stages of the evaluation. Including everyone will strengthen the partnerships and increase the chances that the evaluation will help in responding to the problem at hand.

When deciding who should be involved in the evaluation, we also have to decide who should be responsible for doing the evaluation. Depending upon the type of solution that has been developed by the CAPRA problem solving team, evaluations can be done either by a team member or by someone who is from outside the team.

For responses to problems that are "home grown" — those requiring no outside funding — are more easily evaluated by the CAPRA problem solving team. On the other hand, an external evaluator should evaluate responses to problems that use grant funding because they are more likely to be seen as being objective and unbiased. Agencies awarding grant funds usually will not want evaluations to be conducted by people who might have a vested interest in the results of the evaluation. A good rule of thumb when putting together a grant proposal is to "write" an external evaluator into the grant. This will show the funding agency that we understand the need for evaluation and are willing to have the problem response put before an objective eye.

As with the partners to a response when using the CAPRA model, it is best to have the external evaluator involved at as early a stage in the process as is possible. For example, the external evaluator can be very helpful in clarifying goals and defining objectives when working through the analysis state of CAPRA. Once the CAPRA problem solving team has defined its goals, the external evaluator might be the best person to define objectives that are measurable.

External evaluators can come from a number of places. For instance, someone with evaluation skills from another village might be of assistance. We might also find someone from a governmental agency that can evaluate a response to a problem.

A great place to find external evaluators is at the colleges and universities that serve your area. The professors and graduate students employed by these organizations often have special knowledge about different problem areas and have conducted similar evaluations in the past. A graduate student at the University of Alaska Fairbanks might, for instance, be very knowledgeable about subsistence hunting issues and can help develop measurable objectives for a response to a fish and game problem. Likewise, a professor from the University of Alaska Anchorage could have a great deal of experience evaluating community responses to domestic violence and could help to put together a survey to find out how well those responses worked. There is no need to feel shy about requesting the assistance of university evaluators. Most are glad to help out, and many will feel honored to be asked to help.

Making the Evaluation Ethical

When doing an evaluation of a problem solving response, it is important to insure that it is conducted in an ethical manner. Being ethical when doing an evaluation basically involves (1) making sure that no harm comes to individuals being studied and (2) insuring that the evaluation is conducted fairly with integrity and objectivity.

It almost goes without saying that we need to make sure our evaluations do no physical harm to the individuals being studied. And yet, unless care is taken, there is another type of harm that can result when conducting evaluations. Of course, this refers to the harm to peoples' reputations that can result from private information not being kept in secret.

The potential for harming others' reputations is very real. When we conduct evaluations of responses to community problems, we are often dealing with issues and behaviors that are sometimes illegal, often immoral, and, at the very least, quite embarrassing.

If an evaluation deals with potentially sensitive issues, we need to make sure that peoples' privacy is protected and that information from agency records and from survey responses is kept confidential. When potentially embarrassing information is being gathered in an evaluation, it is best that we collect that information anonymously. Unless it is absolutely necessary, the person's name shouldn't go on records or surveys if their reputation could be harmed if someone else saw that information. For example, if we were doing a survey of victims of spousal assault, we would want to make sure to not attach the name of the person being surveyed to the response sheets.

Aside from making sure no harm comes to the evaluation subjects, we also need to make sure that the evaluation is conducted truthfully and objectively. When doing an evaluation, it is best if the evaluator maintains a value-free, politically indifferent approach to the subject matter. The evaluator's personal, subjective feelings should be kept separate from what they are studying. The evaluation should be conducted openly and honestly. In a sense, the evaluator should allow the information gathered in the objectives measurement part of evaluation to "speak for itself" even if that information shows that the problem solving response did not have its desired effect.

How Do We Deal With those Who Object to Assessment?

The assessment of a problem solving response, especially the evaluation part of assessment, is sometimes not welcomed by those involved with the response. This unwillingness to take part in assessment can come from many sources:

- Most people don't like having someone looking at how well they are doing their jobs.
- Some people don't like the idea of spending money on assessment when they feel that the money could be better spent delivering a response.
- Other people believe that good ideas will work; so if we have a good idea, there really is no reason for assessment.

There are three basic ways for us to deal with these kinds of objections. We have to insure that the assessment is done openly with all stakeholders involved, we must insure that people understand that it is the response that is being evaluated not their performance, and we must stress the need to assess to show funding agencies that their money is going to good use.

One of the best ways to deal with objections to the assessment process is by conducting it openly and by involving all individuals who might be affected by the assessment. Those doing the assessment should obtain the agreement of the stakeholders about what will be assessed before the assessment begins. During the process of assessment, the evaluator should have regular consultations to make sure they cooperate as agreed. As with the selection of partners under the

CAPRA model, the more open the assessment process is, the less likely people will feel threatened by it.

Another way to deal with these objections is to stress the idea that assessment involves an evaluation of a problem solving response and not the performance of individuals. If people feel like their jobs are on the line because of an assessment, they are probably not going to be too cooperative with an assessment. In fact, they might work to undermine the process. Throughout the assessment process we need to assure the program delivery people that we are evaluating the effectiveness of a response and not their performance. One of the reasons for documenting our responses is that it helps us when the response has been implemented to pinpoint the reasons for why a program did or did not work. These reasons usually have nothing to do with those individuals responsible for delivering the response. Assessment and evaluation should be seen as a tool for improvement and not as a reason for replacing personnel.

The final way to deal with objections to assessment is to make it clear that it is needed to show funding agencies that they are receiving their money's worth. Without proof of the usefulness of a response, funding agencies will be unwilling and unlikely to fund projects in the future. With the many problems that we have to deal with in our communities (both Alaska Native villages and in big cities like Anchorage), we have to be careful to meet the requirements of funding agencies so that we can go back to them for money to deal with problems that may arise at a later date.

What Do We Do With Our Assessment?

When done with care, the results of our assessments will be of interest to many types of people. It is important to make certain that we think about who might be interested in, and who needs to know about, our assessment findings because of these various interests. In most cases, the assessment reports should be presented to:

- Project staff, so they can have an idea of about the effects of their efforts,
- Tribal Councils, so they can have an understanding of the CAPRA team's activities,
- CAPRA partners, so they can see the benefits of working together,
- Evaluation participants, so they will know that their time was well spent, and
- Granting agencies, so they will find out that their funds were well spent.

The presentation of our assessment findings should take two forms. First of all, a written report should be produced. As noted above in the section about documentation, a written report serves many purposes and can reach a wide audience. It is important that this report be written at a level that the audience can understand. This is especially important when an external evaluator (such as a university professor) conducts the assessment. These external evaluators should be encouraged to produce their reports in a format that is understandable to all interested parties.

It is usually not enough only to produce a written report. The findings should also be presented in meetings with the interested parties. So, for instance, when an evaluation report is completed, you might want to get on the Tribal Council agenda to present your findings. When presenting to project staff members, the findings could be talked about at a weekly staff meeting. The presentation of assessment findings to CAPRA partners might be done at a special wrap up meeting. In fact, if the CAPRA problem solving response was successful, that final meeting could be a celebration of the success.

Conclusion

From the setting of goals and objectives through to the decisions of who and how to report our findings, the process of assessment under the CAPRA community problem solving model can require a good deal of planning and effort. Nonetheless, we need to make sure that that assessments are completed with due care and concern. Assessment shouldn’t be seen as an afterthought. Instead, it should be seen as an integral part of the CAPRA problem solving process. Given the work we put into the other steps of the CAPRA process, it would be a shame if we didn't take the time and effort to find out the effectiveness of our responses.