Successful Service Transformation

Self-Assessment

Version One, July 2018

Introduction

Self-assessment is a powerful organisational review and improvement technique. It involves your leadership team and other relevant stakeholders developing a consensus view on your organisation's strengths and areas for improvement in relation to a suitable model of organisational excellence. We recommend that archive services use the Archive Services Resilience Model as the basis for self-assessment[1].

This provides a sound basis for developing improvement projects/actions, which should be incorporated into your service plans. Achievement of these improvements over time will develop the capability to achieve enhanced outcomes. All organisations have strengths and areas for improvement; the successful ones know what these are and are committed to actions!

Carried out effectively, self-assessment provides the following:

- **identification of the organisation's strengths, which provides recognition of progress for everyone**
- **identification of the organisation's areas for improvement, which provides a sound basis for improvement**

The process of carrying out self-assessment can also improve:

- **staff awareness of the way in which the organisation or partnership works**
- **staff ownership of improvements**
- **values and habits of continuous improvement, synergy, trust and teamwork**
- **insight to what is required to achieve enhanced impact and resilience**
- **improvements in partnership working and relationships**

Structured cyclical self-assessment lies at the heart of organisational improvement. It is a popular tool, used in many organisations around the world. It is not new, nor particularly complicated. Many organisations use structured self-assessment and many are using aspects of self-assessment by a different name. However, there are many stumbling blocks to carrying out comprehensive and effective self-assessment. These tips will assist you to avoid these stumbling blocks.

If you require further guidance and support for effective facilitation, contact The National Archives Sector Development Team.

Health Warning!
Self-assessment is not a competition, a points-scoring exercise, a badge-chasing exercise, a 'blame game' or a way to improve your image; it is simply an exercise to help you to develop awareness and agree priorities for improvement.

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[1] Examples of generic models include the Survive & Thrive Framework, the CSIT Benchmark and the EFQM Excellence Model

Methodology

Self-assessment is an exercise in critical thinking. Therefore, it involves a mix of consensus discussion and analysis of data (e.g. performance data and feedback from stakeholders).

Self-assessment is conducted by a 'self-assessment team', comprising managers and other leaders as identified in your 'organisational model'. This could be supplemented by other members of staff, volunteers and partners. One approach is for different people to conduct the self-assessment for each characteristic; however, the core team should remain together for the whole process.

The self-assessment team conducts the self-assessment during one or more workshops. During the workshops the team discusses the organisation's progress against the criteria, giving their honest perceptions. Performance data and feedback from stakeholders is made available to support the discussions. Critical friends are often used to provide an external challenge.

The sessions need to be led by a skilled facilitator, who could be a member of the team, someone from another department, a partner, or an external specialist. Often, critical friends are invited to the sessions to provide an external challenge (this role could be played by the facilitator).

The objective is to arrive at a **consensus** agreement in relation to each criterion. In a consensus everybody feels happy with and is willing to stand behind the decisions. This enables the team to create an accurate and insightful picture of the organisation's strengths and areas for improvement and ensures there is enough energy to move forward (individuals only know part of the overall picture). Consensus requires the following beliefs and habits amongst the team members:

- Everyone's perception of the organisation is right and valuable – your goal is not to persuade everyone that your view is right!
- Everyone's collective perceptions will create insight which is 'greater than the sum of the parts'
- "Seek first to understand then to be understood" (Seven Habits of Highly Effective People, by Stephen Covey)

The workshops need to be positive and energetic; therefore, they should last between two and four hours and include breaks. An archive service self-assessment should take a maximum of eight hours in total.

Tips for the self-assessment team

a) Remember that self-assessment is a valuable way of identifying improvements, rather than a tool necessary because of external pressure, a one-off exercise or a 'bolt-on' to normal work.

b) Recognise that self-assessment is not a review of the people working in the organisation; it is about the way the organisation or partnership works.

c) Remember that that self-assessment is not a threat or criticism.

d) Minimise the pressures to achieve higher judgements. Self-assessment is not a competition, a points-scoring exercise or a way to improve your image – these perceptions are all barriers to identifying accurate and in-depth areas for improvement.

e) Remember that identifying ratings is not an exact science and should not be the focus or the goal – establishing accurate and valuable areas for improvement is the primary goal.

f) Honesty and confidentiality are essential before during and after self-assessment workshops.

g) In this exercise there is no 'failure' – just feedback, no 'problems' – just areas for improvement (they cannot be 'problems' if they have been clearly defined) and no 'blame' – just cause.

h) Ensure that self-assessment doesn't become a 'paper-chase' or 'box ticking' exercise. Remember that you do not have to do anything 'for an external Validator'.

i) Avoid discussions about trivia or a checklist approach. Self-assessment is about developing collective insight to how the organisation works and what needs to be improved in order to make a significant difference to results.

j) Always "begin with the end in mind" (Dr Stephen Covey). If faced with a difficult decision during self-assessment go back to this statement.

k) Keep your sense of humour!

Tips for self-assessment workshop facilitators

a) Before you go into a session, remind yourself what you are there for: to remove any interference and make it easy for the team to reach agreement on strengths and areas for improvement against the criterion set out in the Resilience Model. You are there to achieve this by structuring the discussions, triggering incisive views, explaining the criteria if needed, posing challenging questions and maintaining the team's energy.

b) Capture the outputs of the session either on flipcharts or an electronic version of the Model, which should be projected onto a large screen in the room. Both of these approaches create a single shared focus of attention for the team. It is important that everyone in the team is happy to stand behind the outputs before they leave. The advantage of an electronic version projected in the room is that it minimises the need for report writing after the workshop (and removes the temptation to change key words back in the office!).

c) Stick to the planned start and finish times. Structure the discussions to ensure that the session covers what is required within the allocated time. Do not be afraid of letting conversations run, even if they run into different criteria; this will often save time later in the workshop. It is better to have an in-depth discussion about a small number of criteria than a bland conversation about many.

d) You don't have to start at characteristic one and work through to ten; group the criteria or follow threads (for example, **Community Consultation and Engagement**, followed by **Outcomes-Focus,** followed by **Forward Planning)**.

e) Use the evaluation tool within the Resilience Model to guide your prompts and questions (i.e. 'Plan, Do, Check / Act and Impact'). If you are using an alternative model of organisational excellence it will be accompanied by an evaluation tool (normally very similar to the above tool).

f) Encourage everyone in the team to give their views and perceptions, by repeating the question to the whole group in another way, looking at the person, or directing a question to that person.

g) One of your main tasks is to ask questions which challenge people to think hard about their perceptions and assumptions and gives them the opportunity to think again when they hear their answer. Keep asking the questions until there is consensus about the response and until you can clearly understand the logic of this response; at this moment the self-assessment team will reach a new collective insight.

h) Phrase your questions using 'how', 'what' and 'when'; avoid 'why' as this can provoke a defensive response, closed-ended questions (i.e. those which can be answered with 'yes' or 'no'), unless you want to confirm a point or end a conversation, and leading questions (i.e. where the answer lies within the question).

i)   Be legitimately curious about the organisation and the way in which it works and ask the questions from this state of mind, as opposed to thinking (consciously or unconsciously) that:

- they need to be given a hard time, like an inspector would!
- you know better and so need to give them advice
- what they are doing is wrong!

Remind yourself and remind the team that you are not asking the questions because you need to know the answer, you are asking them because this will help them…and it is not a quiz! Reflect on your vocal tones and body language to check whether you are giving the right impression to support the above state of mind.

j)   Accept silences! It is essential to give people time to think. Silence is a good sign!

k)   Use different tools during the workshop to maintain energy, focus and involvement (e.g. using scorecards, silent feedback through post-it notes, sub-groups, asking people to move to different parts of the room to reflect their perception).

l)   Keep the energy and positivity going throughout the workshop by:

- using a mixture of tools and techniques
- maintaining and demonstrating your own energy and positivity
- humour!