

# Chapter 8

## Insider Effects: Empathy in Needs Assessment Practice

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*Needs assessment generally refers to the identification of some need or problem to be addressed. The authors aim to demonstrate how empathy, when shaped by authentic affinity or involvement with an organization, can serve the needs assessment experience in a positive way. As part of the chapter, the authors describe their approach and highlight pertinent findings from the needs assessment, which focused on proactive opportunities to enhance outcomes in parent efficacy. The authors also detail accounts of participant experiences within the process, including their interactions with the practitioner and overall experience. Finally, the authors share practitioner reflections on the overall process.*

## **ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND**

Human performance technology is the “study and ethical practice of improving productivity in organizations by designing and developing effective interventions that are results-oriented, comprehensive, and systemic” (Pershing, 2006), p. 6). While there are many salient phrases within this definition that ground the work of performance improvement consultants, “in organizations” is a key prepositional phrase because it demonstrates an awareness that performance is relative to and situated within a specific context as defined by whatever organization is the focus of inquiry. When working in this capacity, it is imperative to first understand how that organization functions. The work presented in this case was performed in collaboration with and on behalf of one organization, the Coalition for Neurodiverse Learners (pseudonym).

### **Organizational Mission**

Currently, there are a growing number of learners with developmental delays, learning related disabilities, and/or Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) (Abnett, 2013; VanderPaelt, Warreyn, & Roeyers, 2014). According to the Centers for Disease Control, one in every 59 children has been diagnosed with ASD (“CDC increases the estimate of autism’s prevalence by 15 percent, to 1 in 59 children,” 2018). While the diagnoses are more frequent, the journey for parents to come to terms with the diagnosis, discover how best to care for their children, and arm themselves with the knowledge required to properly advocate for their children is a long and winding one. Luckily, there are several organizations that exist to assist parents on that journey. One such organization can be found within the Washington, D.C. metro area. Incorporated under section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code of 1986, as amended, the Coalition for Neurodiverse Learners boasts a mission to improve the educational outcomes and experiences of students on the autism spectrum within a large county outside of the city. The non-profit both collaborates with and serves families, educators, local county public school policymakers, professional service providers, self-advocates, and students with ASD.

### **Organizational Services**

The Coalition for Neurodiverse Learners leverages fundraising, paid memberships, and optional one-time event fees to provide a number of educational events for students with ASD, parents of students with ASD, and educators who serve students with ASD. Some of the events they offer for students include workshops to practice self-

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