

Training Program Evaluation

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This article broadly addresses training program evaluation challenges and strategies to mitigate those issues. To determine the best way to address evaluation, there may be something learned from the private sector. In 2008, American corporations spent approximately \$134 billion on employee training programs (Baun & Scott, 2010). Despite these high expenditures, many organizations do not recognize the need for training program evaluation (Lingham, Richley, & Rezania, 2006). This is partly due to the fact that training programs rarely produce measurable data which would prove the value of the training investment (Pineda, 2010). One reason these data are not produced is due to the lack of indicators of training effectiveness. According to Praslova (2010), selecting appropriate indicators of training effectiveness is difficult for organizations if the criteria to measure effectiveness are not well defined. This leads to the root of the problem. To ensure effective training, the training provider must implement training program evaluation.

Implementing Training Program Evaluation

Although a challenging task, assessing the value of training programs must be incorporated into the needs assessment stages of a training program. It is also important that leadership buy-in to the idea of assessing the training program early in the development phase (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2010). As highlighted by Brauchle and Schmidt (2004), one training program evaluation model, which has gained wide acceptance, is Kirkpatrick's model, first introduced in 1979. Kirkpatrick's model includes four levels of evaluation which address student reaction; knowledge, skills, and attitudes; behavior; and results. Even though the Kirkpatrick model represents a solution for organizations which have yet to implement training program evaluations, relatively few organizations are doing so. According to Sims (1993), organizations either lack the knowledge in creating a useful evaluation method or they do not recognize the need for an effective evaluation tool. With relatively high expenditures on training initiatives and programs, this area has significant room for improvement.

Determining Training Effectiveness

Corporations that do implement training program evaluation typically utilize Return on Investment (ROI) methods to measure effectiveness (Brauchle & Schmidt, 2004). ROI can be measured in several different ways, but most are directly tied to employee performance following the training. For example, time saved, or increased output can be compared to a dollar figure. For organizations in fields where production cannot be easily measured, ROI may not be the best metric (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2010). Additionally, public sector organizations cannot easily equate ROI as a strong measure of a training program's success (Sims, 1993).

Whether private or public sector, organizations should strive for constant improvement to new and/or existing training programs. Sims (1993) conducted a case study to determine why evaluations were not widely conducted in public sector training programs. During this study, Sims found that there was no shared understanding about what should be included in a course evaluation. Sims further suggested that evaluation of training is often difficult and time-consuming; program administrators assume that the training will be sufficient; and lastly, administrators who

champion the training may feel threatened by an objective evaluation that may discredit the training program (1993).

Training programs often present dynamic challenges. Training development must not be viewed as a snapshot in time, but, rather, addressed continuously to ensure students are receiving the best possible training product within reasonable resource constraints (Praslova, 2010). The dynamic nature of establishing training programs highlights potential barriers to the implementation of effective evaluation tools, which is most likely seen in both, public and private-sector organizations (Sims, 1993). Organizational leadership must champion training initiatives if resources are to be applied to making improvements (Pineda, 2010). Sims' findings identify an organizational change problem, which is outside of the scope of this study, but worthy of analysis on a larger scale (1993).

Using the Kirkpatrick model, it is necessary to determine which level of training is being evaluated. The same evaluation cannot be widely applied across all four levels because each level would identify different results. According to Kirkpatrick and Kirkpatrick (2010),

organizations must determine the evidence that would be required at each of the four levels to show a training program was successful. When measurement methods, tools, and techniques are clearly defined at the start of an initiative evaluation is much easier to perform (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2010). For example, evaluating training according to Level I of the Kirkpatrick model would assess student reaction, while Level III would assess demonstrated student behaviors. This being said, the question still remains: what is an effective training evaluation model which can be widely used?

Implementing an Effective Evaluation Method

Kirkpatrick and Kirkpatrick (2010) assert that ROI may not be the best metric for evaluating training programs. They contend that return on expectations (ROE) is a better metric. ROE is an evaluation method that begins with trainers having an understanding of the desired learning outcomes. Additionally, trainers have stakeholder buy-in that have a vested interest in the success of the training program. By including training representatives in the decision-making process, trainers will

have an idea of the priority of the initiative, which is often tied to resources (Sims, 1993).

Managing a training program is an active and ongoing task. What was adequate yesterday may or may not be relevant today.

Organizational leaders and trainers must continuously evaluate their own curriculum, change the content, and incorporate feedback based on course evaluations (Pineda, 2010). If these procedures are not conducted, a training program can very quickly be viewed by the training audience as irrelevant. Seeking constant improvement of course content and delivery is an inherent responsibility of the training organization that must be exercised to maintain currency (Sims, 1993).

When trying to determine students' perceptions of a training program, Fast (1974) suggests addressing the measuring of attitudes and behaviors following a training event. Behaviors and attitudes are often difficult to measure immediately following training; therefore, accurate evaluation may or may not adequately measure effectiveness (Brauchle & Schmidt, 2004). However, Fast (1974) suggests that if the trainees will not be directly observed following the training, the organizational

leadership responsible for generating the evaluation can incorporate open-ended questions to attempt to derive patterns and trends from the trainees. These types of questions typically enable the trainers to gain more insight into what the trainees were thinking after the training has taken place. The suggestions made by Fast are specifically evaluating learner reaction, which is Level I in Kirkpatrick's model. By thinking through the evaluation process on the front end, an organization can establish better curriculum leading toward achieving the desired learning outcomes of the organizational leadership (Lingham, Richley, & Rezania, 2006).

Although a significant amount of resources are allocated to training, little evidence of effective training evaluation exists (Lingham, Richley, & Rezania, 2006). Evaluation must be developed up front as an integral component of training program development (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2010). This practice forces the training organization to establish widely understood and broadly accepted course content.

Course evaluation must be implemented to incorporate feedback from the training audience, while organizational leaders that are

responsible for the training must develop desired learning outcomes at the onset of program development (Brauchle & Schmidt, 2004). If the process is overly complex, it will most likely lose momentum. Lastly, leadership must champion these efforts. If not, it will be very difficult to make noteworthy improvements that are reinforced by positive course evaluations (Praslova, 2010). Following these procedures, the trainers can ensure they are teaching a quality product that is beneficial to the trainees, relevant to the current operating environment, and has the ability to achieve the desired end-state of the organizational leadership.