EVALUATING TRAINING PROGRAMS

THE FOUR LEVELS

SECOND EDITION

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Chapter 3

The Four Levels: An Overview

The four levels represent a sequence of ways to evaluate programs. Each level is important and has an impact on the next level. As you move from one level to the next, the process becomes more difficult and time-consuming, but it also provides more valuable information. None of the levels should be bypassed simply to get to the level that the trainer considers the most important. These are the four levels:

Level 1—Reaction
Level 2—Learning
Level 3—Behavior
Level 4—Results

Reaction

As the word *reaction* implies, evaluation on this level measures how those who participate in the program react to it. I call it a measure of customer satisfaction. For many years, I conducted seminars, institutes, and conferences at the University of Wisconsin Management Institute. Organizations paid a fee to send their people to these public programs. It is obvious that the reaction of participants was a measure of customer satisfaction. It is also obvious that reaction had to be favorable if we were to stay in business and attract new customers as well as get present customers to return to future programs.

It isn't quite so obvious that reaction to in-house programs is also a measure of customer satisfaction. In many in-house programs, participants are required to attend whether they want to or not. However, they still are customers even if they don't pay, and their reactions can make or break a training program. What they say to their bosses often gets to higher-level managers, who make decisions about the future of training programs. So, positive reactions are just as important for trainers who run in-house programs as they are for those who offer public programs.

It is important not only to get a reaction but to get a positive reaction. As just described, the future of a program depends on positive reaction. In addition, if participants do not react favorably, they probably will not be motivated to learn. Positive reaction may not ensure learning, but negative reaction almost certainly reduces the possibility of its occurring.

Learning

Learning can be defined as the extent to which participants change attitudes, improve knowledge, and/or increase skill as a result of attending the program.

Those are the three things that a training program can accomplish. Programs dealing with topics like diversity in the workforce aim primarily at changing attitudes. Technical programs aim at improving skills. Programs on topics like leadership, motivation, and communication can aim at all three objectives. In order to evaluate learning, the specific objectives must be determined.

Some trainers say that no learning has taken place unless change in behavior occurs. In the four levels described in this book, learning has taken place when one or more of the following occurs: Attitudes are changed. Knowledge is increased. Skill is improved. One or more of these changes must take place if a change in behavior is to occur.

Behavior

Behavior can be defined as the extent to which change in behavior has occurred because the participant attended the training program. Some trainers want to bypass levels 1 and 2—reaction and learning—in order to measure changes in behavior. This is a serious mistake. For example,

suppose that no change in behavior is discovered. The obvious conclusion is that the program was ineffective and that it should be discontinued. This conclusion may or may not be accurate. Reaction may have been favorable, and the learning objectives may have been accomplished, but the level 3 or 4 conditions may not have been present.

In order for change to occur, four conditions are necessary:

1. The person must have a desire to change.
2. The person must know what to do and how to do it.
3. The person must work in the right climate.
4. The person must be rewarded for changing.

The training program can accomplish the first two requirements by creating a positive attitude toward the desired change and by teaching the necessary knowledge and skills. The third condition, right climate, refers to the participant's immediate supervisor. Five different kinds of climate can be described:

1. ***Preventing:*** The boss forbids the participant from doing what he or she has been taught to do in the training program. The boss may be influenced by the organizational culture established by top management. Or the boss's leadership style may conflict with what was taught.
2. ***Discouraging:*** The boss doesn't say, "You can't do it," but he or she makes it clear that the participant should not change behavior because it would make the boss unhappy. Or the boss doesn't model the behavior taught in the program, and this negative example discourages the subordinate from changing.
3. ***Neutral:*** The boss ignores the fact that the participant has attended a training program. It is business as usual. If the subordinate wants to change, the boss has no objection as long as the job gets done. If negative results occur because behavior has changed, then the boss may turn into a discouraging or even preventing climate.
4. ***Encouraging:*** The boss encourages the participant to learn and apply his or her learning on the job. Ideally, the boss discussed the program with the subordinate beforehand and stated that the two would discuss application as soon as the program was over. The boss basically says, "I am interested in knowing what you learned and how I can help you transfer the learning to the job."
5. ***Requiring:*** The boss knows what the subordinate learns and makes sure that the learning transfers to the job. In some cases, a learning

contract is prepared that states what the subordinate agrees to do. This contract can be prepared at the end of the training session, and a copy can be given to the boss. The boss sees to it that the contract is implemented. Malcolm Knowles's book *Using Learning Contracts* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1986) describes this process.

The fourth condition, rewards, can be intrinsic (from within), extrinsic (from without), or both. Intrinsic rewards include the feelings of satisfaction, pride, and achievement that can occur when change in behavior has positive results. Extrinsic rewards include praise from the boss, recognition by others, and monetary rewards, such as merit pay increases and bonuses.

It becomes obvious that there is little or no chance that training will transfer to job behavior if the climate is preventing or discouraging. If the climate is neutral, change in behavior will depend on the other three conditions just described. If the climate is encouraging or requiring, then the amount of change that occurs depends on the first and second conditions.

As stated earlier, it is important to evaluate both reaction and learning in case no change in behavior occurs. Then it can be determined whether the fact that there was no change was the result of an ineffective training program or of the wrong job climate and lack of rewards.

It is important for trainers to know the type of climate that participants will face when they return from the training program. It is also important for them to do everything that they can to see to it that the climate is neutral or better. Otherwise there is little or no chance that the program will accomplish the behavior and results objectives, because participants will not even try to use what they have learned. Not only will no change occur, but those who attended the program will be frustrated with the boss, the training program, or both for teaching them things that they can't apply.

One way to create a positive job climate is to involve bosses in the development of the program. Chapter 1 suggested asking bosses to help to determine the needs of subordinates. Such involvement helps to ensure that a program teaches practical concepts, principles, and techniques. Another approach is to present the training program, or at least a condensed version of it, to the bosses before the supervisors are trained.

A number of years ago, I was asked by Dave Harris, personnel manager, to present an eighteen-hour training program to 240 supervisors at A. O. Smith Corporation in Milwaukee. I asked Dave if he could

arrange for me to present a condensed, three- to six-hour version to the company's top management. He arranged for the condensed version to be offered at the Milwaukee Athletic Club. After the six-hour program, the eight upper-level managers were asked for their opinions and suggestions. They not only liked the program but told us to present the entire program first to the thirty-five general foremen and superintendents who were the bosses of the 240 supervisors. We did what they suggested. We asked these bosses for their comments and encouraged them to provide an encouraging climate when the supervisors had completed the program. I am not sure to what extent this increased change in behavior over the level that we would have seen if top managers had not attended or even known the content of the program, but I am confident that it made a big difference. We told the supervisors that their bosses had already attended the program. This increased their motivation to learn and their desire to apply their learning on the job.

Much has been written concerning change in behavior, or "transfer of training," as it is often termed. Some of the references at the end of Chapter 8 describe concepts, principles, and techniques.

Results

Results can be defined as the final results that occurred because the participants attended the program. The final results can include increased production, improved quality, decreased costs, reduced frequency and/or severity of accidents, increased sales, reduced turnover, and higher profits. It is important to recognize that results like these are the reason for having some training programs. Therefore, the final objectives of the training program need to be stated in these terms.

Some programs have these in mind on a long-term basis. For example, one major objective of the popular program on diversity in the workforce is to change the attitudes of supervisors and managers toward minorities in their departments. We want supervisors to treat all people fairly, show no discrimination, and so on. These are not tangible results that can be measured in terms of dollars and cents. But it is hoped that tangible results will follow. Likewise, it is difficult if not impossible to measure final results for programs on such topics as leadership, communication, motivation, time management, empowerment,

decision making, or managing change. We can state and evaluate desired behaviors, but the final results have to be measured in terms of improved morale or other nonfinancial terms. It is hoped that such things as higher morale or improved quality of work life will result in the tangible results just described.

Summary

Trainers should begin to plan by considering the desired results. These results should be determined in cooperation with managers at various levels. Surveys and/or interviews can be used. A desirable and practical approach is to use an advisory committee consisting of managers from different departments. Their participation will give them a feeling of ownership and will probably increase the chances of their creating a climate that encourages change in behavior. The next step is to determine what behaviors will produce the desired results. Then trainers need to determine what knowledge, skills, and attitudes will produce the desired behavior.

The final challenge is to present the training program in a way that enables the participants not only to learn what they need to know but also to react favorably to the program. This is the sequence in which programs should be planned. The four levels of evaluation are considered in reverse. First, we evaluate reaction. Then, we evaluate learning, behavior, and results—in that order. Each of the four levels is important, and we should not bypass the first two in order to get to levels 3 and 4. Reaction is easy to do, and we should measure it for every program. Trainers should proceed to the other three levels as staff, time, and money are available. The next four chapters provide guidelines, suggested forms, and procedures for each level. The case studies in Part Two of the book describe how the levels were applied in different types of programs and organizations.