Kirkpatrick's Four Levels of Training Evaluation

Organisations spend a lot of time and money on training, but how do they know that it works? In 1959, Donald Kirkpatrick published a simple way to answer this question in a series of articles. His model looks at training on four levels: reaction, learning, behavior and results. Each level builds on the one before it and gives a deeper view of the training's value. Today, it is one of the most widely used models for evaluating training around the world.

1. Reaction

Level 1 measures how participants react to the training. In Kirkpatrick's original 1959 model, this meant how well they liked the programme. The later New World Kirkpatrick Model, by James and Wendy Kirkpatrick, also asks whether it was engaging and relevant to their job. This is usually measured with a short feedback form or a quick conversation at the end of the session. A good reaction is a helpful first signal, but reaction scores are only weakly linked to how much people actually learn. So a happy group alone does not prove that the training worked.

Example: After a cooking class, the teacher asks each guest to rate the evening and name one thing to improve. This reaction check shows that people loved the recipes but wanted more time to practise.

At work: Sahar, a training manager at a hotel group, runs a customer service course for new reception staff. Her reaction form shows high scores, but several people say that the role plays were too short. She makes the role plays longer for the next group.

2. Learning

Level 2 measures what participants actually learned. In the original model, this meant knowledge, skills and attitudes, and the New World model later added confidence and commitment. It answers the question: did they gain what the training promised? Common tools are short tests, practical demonstrations, or a comparison of skills before and after the course. Clear learning objectives make this level much easier to measure. Without learning, change in the workplace is unlikely.

Example: A driving school checks learning with a practice test before and after ten lessons. The learner's score rises from half of the questions to almost all of them.

At work: Sahar asks the receptionists to handle a difficult guest in a short role play, before and after the course. This learning check shows that most of them now stay calm and offer a solution. Two staff members still struggle, so she gives them extra coaching.

3. Behavior

Level 3 measures whether people use what they learned when they are back at work. This is where many training programmes fail, because the workplace does not always support the

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new skills. Behavior is usually checked a few weeks or months later, through observation, manager feedback or interviews. Managers play a key role, because they can encourage, remind and reward the new behavior. If behavior does not change, it is important to ask why, not only to blame the training.

Example: A man learns healthy cooking in a course, but at home he soon returns to fast food. A friend checks his behavior a month later and suggests planning the week's meals every Sunday, and the new habit finally sticks.

At work: Two months after the course, Sahar visits the hotels and observes the receptionists at work. This behavior check shows that the new skills are used in two hotels, but not in the third, where the manager never discussed the course. Sahar meets that manager, and together they plan short weekly reminders.

4. Results

Level 4 measures the results for the organisation: the outcomes that the training was meant to improve. These can include higher sales, fewer mistakes, better customer satisfaction, lower costs or better safety. Results take longer to appear and can be influenced by many other factors. That is why it helps to agree on the expected results before the training starts. The New World Kirkpatrick Model, developed later by his son James and Wendy Kirkpatrick, recommends planning training by starting with the desired results and working backwards.

Example: A football club trains its young players in fitness for a full season. The results level shows fewer injuries and more matches won by the end of the year.

At work: Six months later, Sahar looks at the results in the guest surveys. Guest satisfaction with reception has risen in all three hotels, and complaints have fallen by a third. Sahar shares these results with the managers, and the course becomes standard for all new staff.

Conclusion

In summary, Kirkpatrick's four levels evaluate training through reaction, learning, behavior and results. Each level answers a different question, from how people felt to what changed for the organisation. Many organisations measure only the first level, which tells only a small part of the story. The full picture comes from looking at all four levels together. Good evaluation turns training from a cost into a clear investment.

Sources

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