

Evaluating Training to Ensure Implementation

By Matthew Schmidt

Training that makes a difference to organization performance incorporates measurement and follow-up steps. By not evaluating training, and measuring its impacts, you may waste company dollars by not implementing meaningful improvements that save time, money and frustration.

If your company is like many, you conduct employee training but are unsure if learners walk away with information and skills that really help your company meet its goals. While the percentages vary, studies consistently show less than 18% of employers evaluate if their training results in changed behavior and improved organizational performance. Without measuring results it is impossible to gauge if dollars spent on employee development provide any Return on Investment (ROI).

Calculating ROI on training investments is one benefit of evaluating training. Another benefit is captured by what my uncle learned in the Navy – “Inspect what you expect.” By measuring training results you are establishing lines of accountability for the quality and content of the trainer, as well as the employees you are paying to attend training.

Training evaluation and follow-up is not rocket science, but it does take some common sense and planning. Most professional trainers consider training evaluation at the four levels established by Donald Kirkpatrick in the mid-seventies.

LEVEL I solicits surface reactions from learners. These questionnaires, given at the end of the training, ask learners: Did you like the training? Were the presentation materials clear and understandable? Was the instructor well prepared? Do you feel that this training will help you do your job better? They typically ask learners to respond on a rating scale of 1-5. Asking open-ended questions at end of the form for is a good idea. I like to ask “What two or three things are you taking away from this session that will help you do your job better?” and “Suggestions for Improvement:”

A well-written level one evaluation sheet provides a first blush gauge of how well the topic is being received and if the skills being taught will be supported back on the job. For example, in Sexual Harassment Prevention session I facilitated many people wrote comments like “We really needed this information – a lot of people didn’t know where the line is.” Often the level I evaluations are called “smile sheets” because learners are fairly positive if the training was well organized and not too long.

LEVEL II evaluations measure what has been learned in the training. Establishing a baseline requires pre-training data to compare to post-training information. The pre-training data may not require pre-testing, such as when new product information or a new process is being introduced that few people have seen. Pre-testing may be incorporated into the beginning of the training to show learners what they are going to gain in the training. For example, a training session on preventing workplace theft could begin with pre-test questions regarding: the cost of theft to the company, methods to recognize dishonesty, penalties of being caught, etc Administering the same test at the end of the training session gives learners a feeling of accomplishment while reinforcing the learning points covered in the training.

Written tests are not appropriate for all topics. Skill training is measured more effectively by asking a participant to complete a task (e.g. building a spreadsheet, changing a tire, grading lumber). Observation in the workplace also contributes to pre-training skill data.

The post-training level II evaluation of skills learned can be more difficult to design, but it is critical that you evaluate if learners have met the objectives of the training. Ask learners to perform the task you have covered in training. Require a demonstration of the skill by building the spreadsheet or changing a tire to complete the training. “Role-plays” are often used to practice a new skill and test for competency simultaneously.

LEVEL III evaluation considers how well learners are using the skills back on the job. Often this is done through observation, surveys and performance reports. Earlier, I referred to a Sexual Harassment Prevention training program. After the session, while on site with the client, I noticed the off-color jokes from the week before were pulled off the bulletin board and the employee lounge did not have Jerry Springer running on the TV for half the day. These are level III observations of changed behavior back on the job.

Not all skills taught are readily observable. Surveying participants several weeks after training is another level III method. Ask: What are you doing differently as a result of the training? or Describe how you have utilized ‘X’ to do your job more effectively? Another option is monitoring the performance of an individual or team related to the area of training. Measuring increased units per hour, injury incident reports, customer comment cards can all indicate that training affected behavior.

Often, by simply measuring and communicating the results an organization can positively influence performance. In one situation I witnessed a work team increase “number of cases unloaded per/hr” by more than 80% once productivity data started to be charted and shared with the team on a daily basis. This was before any training had taken place! It is

widely know that recognizing achievement encourages and reinforces performance; making the effort is more likely when measuring results.

LEVEL IV assesses the impact training has on the organization meeting its goals. This is where training results flow to the bottom line. Looking at turnover rates, customer complaints, sales conversions and spoilage/waste levels all indicate if training is having the desired affect on your organization.

Translating the level III measurement of increased “cases unloaded per/hr” into a level IV measurement is merely a matter of multiplying pay rates x labor hours saved = increased profitability, a goal for most companies. The difficult part is separating the training results from other improvement initiatives, like new equipment, market variables, procedural changes.

Some areas of performance are easier to measure than others. Intangibles, like the way employees treat customers and co-workers, the sense of a clear purpose or the confidence a salesperson feels when approaching a new prospect are all very important but difficult to quantify. Level IV measurement of training results can be learners describing how training helped them fulfill a goal. The key point is that the training translates into company goals.

Matthew Schmidt is a Training and Development consultant. Human Resource Partners, based in Traverse City, provides clients with management, customer service, and customized training solutions. He can be reached at 231-932-9175 or email matt@h-r-partners.com