

# Transferring Learning to Behavior

NO DOUBT, corporate universities and training departments have become quite savvy at aligning themselves with business leaders to deliver solutions. As a result, many effective (and some not so effective) ways of demonstrating training's value exist, such as balanced scorecards and return-on-investment calculations. The best demonstration of value, however, occurs when learning translates into lasting behavioral change.

Too often, the subject of learning transfer is lost among the other three levels of evaluation, particularly results measurement. But from a sequential standpoint, it must be done effectively if measures of training value are to be both maximized and meaningful. Unfortunately, when we ignore its power and impact, we also ignore the most compelling driver of strategy and results.

Don Kirkpatrick is still conducting workshops on his famous four levels of evaluation: reaction, learning, behavior, and results. In his talks, he reminds us of the purposes of evaluation:

- to decide if a program should be continued
- to decide if a program should be modified
- to demonstrate the value of training—and thus justify our existence.

While those reasons all remain important, we should now view those four levels as *drivers of strategy*, not just measurements of it.

Consider the typical senior executive's response to this question from a training leader: Are you interested in seeing how effective our latest training course was? While the answer might be, "Sure," imagine that executive's response if the trainer had followed up by asking if he could show how an effective evaluation program would drive the organization's strategy. Bottom line: Senior executives are much more interested in successfully executing their strategy than they are in effectively de-

## The real key to demonstrating value and driving strategy.

By Jim Kirkpatrick

livering training programs.

Several years ago, executives from a midsized Midwestern bank set out to implement Total Quality Management across the organization. Significant money and effort were invested into many rounds of training. When the coursework was completed, most of the workforce was able to diagram value chains and flowchart processes, measure progress, and develop process-improvement plans. But one year later, only a handful of those same employees still used the methods.

On the surface, TQM seemed to be the right approach for the bank. Participants enjoyed the training and received certificates for demonstrating that they had learned the new concepts and techniques. So, what went wrong? Apparently, there was little transfer of learning to behavior because senior and junior-level managers never fully embraced the benefits of TQM. In a nutshell, they did little or nothing to create accountability or support new behaviors.

Lack of managerial support and participant accountability is obviously much more than a training concern. The

bank's strategy, for example, didn't get executed effectively, and the organization never realized all the possible positive results. But the consequences can get worse: Leaders might question the program's value and the training department's competency. That's a reality no trainer wants to face.

### The remedy

The solution to that widespread challenge requires a two-fold approach. First, convince line-of-business and senior leaders that evaluation is the key to strategy execution. Second, find ways to drive evaluation through Level 3 (behavior) to results. That can only be done through a concerted effort to transfer learning into improved behavior.

The good news is that while we're battling participants' natural resistance to change, trainers can help them modify their behaviors and develop new habits, given the appropriate information. In the corporate community, that means balancing two forces: accountability and support. Follow these three suggestions to put insights into practice.

**Convince leaders that evaluation is a significant driver of strategy.** Create a presentation packed with metaphors, best practices, and case studies to prove your point. Also, be prepared to take one of your organization's key strategies and illustrate, step-by-step, how evaluation—with a particular emphasis on the transfer of learning to behavior—can push that program toward successful results. (Using balanced scorecards is a good way to do that.) Then, gain an audience with senior leaders. Influence them to support and become actively involved in upcoming training events and follow-up activities.

**Improve your training of coaching behaviors.** Strong, consistent coaching from supervisors and managers is the key to bridging the chasm that exists between learning and behavior. Train leaders to apply the right amount of accountability and support to their direct reports to

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The bottom line:

Senior executives are more interested in successfully executing their strategy than they are in effectively delivering training programs.

ensure that transfer takes place. Include a 360-degree feedback process to enhance the likelihood that supervisors are applying what they've learned.

**Collaborate for ideas.** Gather your internal partners together to develop two customized lists. One should address ways to support new behavior; the other should focus on accountability. Then, turn those ideas into practice by continually teaching and assessing until they become business as usual.

Transferring learning to behavior has everything to do with the fundamental saying, "What gets measured, gets done." By tying your organization's strategy to your training evaluation process, you'll get the best ROI of all—changed behavior.

**Jim Kirkpatrick** is senior consultant of evaluation services for Corporate University Enterprise in Falls Church, Virginia. He is the co-author (with his father, Donald) of *Transferring Learning to Behaviors: Using the Four Levels to Improve Performance*, which will be released next month; jim.kirkpatrick@insightbb.com.

Send submissions to **Fundamentals, T+D**, 1640 King Street, Box 1443, Alexandria, VA 22313-2043; fundamentals@astd.org.