

Curricula and Evaluation: Maximizing Results

True strategic learning begins with the synergy of curriculum and evaluation.

By Jim Kirkpatrick and Linda Hawk

THERE HAVE BEEN a lot of famous pairs over the years. Laurel and Hardy were the kings of comedy in their day. Forrest Gump said he and Jenny, the love of his life, were like “peas and carrots.” What would a remote Canadian lake be without the blue of the water and sky to go along with the green of the surrounding pine trees? And a piano could not produce its rich music with only white keys.

But there will be another soon-to-be-famous pair: curricula and evaluation. True strategic learning organizations are beginning to discover the synergy of this pairing. More importantly, they are

finding that without leveraging this partnership, their well-thought-out strategic plans are falling short of expected results.

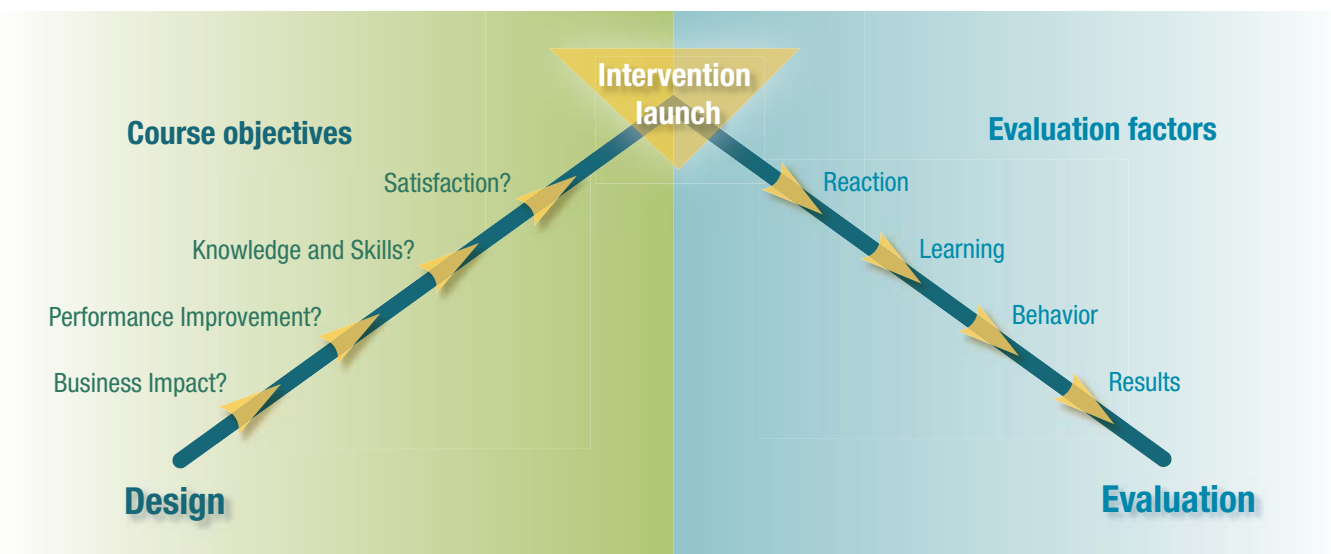
The current trend in the world of strategic learning organizations is the enhancement of the business partnership model. Learning, training, talent development, or whatever you want to call it, is seen as a more valuable contributor to the company’s bottom line. This new way of thinking has been developing over many years. However, the role of evaluation, coupled with strategic targeted curricula, is greatly underappreciated.

Value of learning

A learning leader and one of her corporate university colleagues told us that during a recent business meeting where positive business results were being shared and discussed, nothing was mentioned about the collaborative role of the corporate university. She leaned over to her learning colleague and whispered, “Hey, some of that is ours!”

Those were simple yet extremely profound words. A challenge for all corporate universities and training departments is how to demonstrate the value of learning to business executives. It is easy to see that there is a contribution,

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but difficult to gather the evidence to demonstrate it. We believe that relevant, comprehensive four-level evaluation can help achieve this return-on-investment.

But before we get to the second member of the partnership, let's examine curricula. After all, identifying business needs and developing targeted learning opportunities are the core of ultimate strategic execution. This business partnership between learning and business leaders is critical when connecting learning with strategy. To examine curricula, one must examine the course objectives—yes, we used the words “course objectives” rather than “learning objectives.” There is a very important reason for this, but it is going to get a bit touchy for some, so bear with us.

There is a large group of learning professionals, including instructional designers, who see their role in organizational learning end when participants leave the classroom or complete their e-learning module. Thus, the objectives for a particular course or program reflect what knowledge and skills a participant should gain in the course. If this were true, then the term “learning objectives” would be appropriate. But it isn't. Most training courses are designed to bring about knowledge and skills to foster changed behaviors and subsequent positive results. Therefore, objectives that address all four levels of the Kirkpatrick Evaluation Model (reaction, learning, behavior, and results) actually set the table not only for effective evaluation, but for the execution of the course objectives as well.

Once the business needs are clarified between business and learning leaders, the partnership can work most effectively when the following four questions are answered:

- What business results are we looking for?
- What new behaviors by course participants will be required to bring about those results?
- What new knowledge, skills, and atti-

Enhancing the Partnership

Form a stronger business partnership. Trainers should conduct a needs assessment with their internal business partners and find ways to partner through course and program design, delivery, and execution. Trainers must gather evidence to prove how learning contributes to the targeted results.

Learn to write comprehensive, business-oriented course objectives. These objectives should apply to new as well as existing courses. Trainers should make sure the objectives reflect the intent of the course and go beyond the acquisition of knowledge and skills.

Develop a comprehensive evaluation toolkit and learn how to use it. Avoid mechanically conducting an evaluation by just using smile sheets and pre- and post-course tests. There are many cost- and time-effective methods to evaluate at all four levels. After all, having comprehensive, aligned data is the best way to convince people that “some of those positive results are ours.”

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tudes will be required to bring about the new behaviors?

- What kind of reaction will we need from the participants to set the stage for learning?

Once these questions are answered, course objectives that cover each relevant level can be crafted. Then, evaluation methods and tools can be determined, developed, and implemented to gather the necessary data to show how well each is happening (see graph on page 61).

Customized leadership program

How about a “for instance” to bring these concepts to life? The announcement of Caterpillar's growth goals thrust its leaders into a world of paradoxes. Caterpillar executives needed to operate with autonomy to run a business unit in a way that collaborates with other business unit lead-

ers, be accountable to drive higher business unit profits in a way that does not jeopardize profits in other business units, and maximize the near-term value of current assets but be prepared to make investments that take advantage of global opportunities.

The leadership challenge was not just to develop more leaders; but to develop different leaders—leaders who epitomize collaboration, business acumen, and a global mind-set. Developing a new kind of leader also required new ways of thinking about leadership development.

A cutting-edge, customized leadership program was developed with all of this in mind. In brief, this is how Caterpillar leaders answered the four questions: **Business impact.** Caterpillar is looking to drive higher business unit profits, maximize the near-term value of current assets, and leverage global opportunities.

Performance improvement. Caterpillar wants cross-functional collaboration and effective conflict resolution skills.

Knowledge and skills. Caterpillar needs to increase relevant line-of-business knowledge and develop a new way of thinking about leadership.

Satisfaction. Caterpillar must find the learning experience relevant and enjoyable.

Course objectives were aligned with the answers, and evaluation methods and tools were created to track the data. Individual action planning was a primary method of not only setting up success, but for evaluating it as well.

Finally, after several months, the data that had been captured was analyzed and reported to explain how comprehensive evaluation, following Kirkpatrick's four levels, actually made a significant contribution to the targeted outcomes. **TD**

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