

The Long View
Donald L. Kirkpatrick
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In 1959, Kirkpatrick set the cornerstone for what became the most widely used training evaluation approach in the world. His four-level model that measures reaction, learning, behavior, and results—which started as a 1954 PhD dissertation—is a recognized standard in the learning and performance field. As professor emeritus at the University of Wisconsin, he advises organizations on how to effectively gauge their learning investments.

Q| Did it surprise you that your model became so widely implemented around the world?

Absolutely. It was a complete shock for me to see how it took over the industry. Actually, I never called them four levels or a model of any kind. I just wrote a few articles. Pretty soon, people were writing about it and asking how to evaluate the different levels.

Before, when you mentioned evaluation, nobody knew what you were talking about, whom we should be doing it for, or how it was supposed to be done. Companies were concerned about it, but there was a lot of ambiguity. I think the model kind of perked up everybody: “If it’s that simple and practical, let’s just take the four levels and try them.”

Q| Your model has been revised and critiqued by several scholars. Is there an approach or critique that you consider particularly constructive?

No, there really isn’t. Jack Phillips starts with the four levels and adds what he calls Level 5, return-on-investment. Personally, I don’t think there is such a thing as Level 5, but that’s Jack’s way of approaching it.

I know some people today talk about using stories [to evaluate training]—finding somebody who has gone to a training program, gone back to his job, changed his behavior, and received better results. I don’t really believe in that.

Q| Of your four children, your daughter Sue and son James work in training. Have you offered them any fatherly advice?

Sue has been in sales training at Northwest Airlines for many years. But Jim has really taken off with the four levels, and we’ve worked together for a long time. He not only knows the levels but has expanded each of them.

I don’t think I’ve ever had an argument with Jim, but once in a while I do have to get after him a little bit. Sometimes he indicates that maybe smile sheets—also known as participant reaction surveys—aren’t very valuable. That’s when I have to tell him not to underestimate smile sheets because they measure customer satisfaction. If our customers don’t go back to their jobs saying good things about the training, we’re in trouble.

Q|What was your first job, and what lesson did you take away from it?

I got my bachelor’s degree in accounting and a master’s degree in personnel management from the University of Wisconsin. My professor in charge of the master’s degree said, “Don, there are two possible things you can do. One, you can go into industry and start out in a management training program, or two, you have the potential to be a good teacher at the management institute here at the university.”

So I took his advice and began to teach decision making, leadership, communication, supervision, discipline, and all those other things supervisors need to know. That's also how I got my PhD—by evaluating the programs I was teaching.

After working in industry for a long time, I finally moved back to Milwaukee and went back into doing what I had learned at the management institute—teaching supervisors and executives in the corporate world.

Q| You're a sought-after speaker on evaluation. What other interests compete for your time?

Things changed a lot when I had a cardiac arrest. My daughter-in-law, a nurse who knows CPR, saved my life. She happened to be at the racquet club where I was playing tennis, and when my heart stopped beating, she managed to start it up. Then my wife almost died because of an infection. At that point we decided to move into a retirement home, where we could enjoy ourselves without having to take care of the house.

We still do volunteer work and sing at ecumenical services. I'm active in the Gideons distributing Bibles, and I'm chairman of the South Asian ministries, which support missionaries in India. I also play golf and get together with my family a lot.

Fortunately, my wife and I are both in good health so we can maintain an active role at our retirement home. We are enjoying the fact that we can now encourage, work with, and show love for older people.