

# Transferring Learning to Behavior



Using the Four Levels to Improve Performance

Donald L. Kirkpatrick and  
James D. Kirkpatrick

By the Creator of the Famous Kirkpatrick Four-Level Evaluation Model

An Excerpt From

***Transferring Learning to Behavior:  
Using the Four Levels to Improve Performance***

by Donald L. Kirkpatrick and James D. Kirkpatrick  
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# Preface

## **From Don:**

For many years, I have given presentations and conducted workshops on my four levels for evaluating training programs. The content has been basically the same.

Within the last five years, my son, Dr. James Kirkpatrick, has been applying the levels in his organization, First Indiana Bank, where he is the Vice President of First Indiana's Corporate University. Jim is responsible for all training and development activities as well as the application of the training to improve results. He has given many presentations and conducted workshops in the United States and abroad. His main subjects are the application of the four levels, the transfer of learning to on-the-job behavior, and linking training to strategy using balanced scorecards.

The transfer of training is a major challenge facing training professionals. Jim has asked me to work with him to write a practical book incorporating my four levels into the application. Then Steve Piersanti, president of Berrett-Koehler Publishers Inc., agreed to publish this book.

Jim challenged me to write Chapter 1, “The Four Levels in the twenty-first century.” His first question was, “How much has your approach changed since you introduced the four levels in 1959 in a series of articles in the *T&D*, the publication of the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD)”?

So, I wrote Chapter 1 to provide the background for the rest of the book, which Jim wrote. We hope it will help you understand and apply the four levels, and provide practical suggestions for transferring learning into effective behavior.

Donald L. Kirkpatrick

### From Jim:

I had conducted seminars with my father, Don Kirkpatrick, for the University of Wisconsin Management Institute for several years, but to be honest, had not paid all that much attention to his famous four levels. That all changed in 1998. A friend and colleague of mine, John Galloway, was finishing a master’s degree at Indiana University/Purdue University at Indianapolis and heard that my father was coming to Indianapolis to visit my family and me. “Jim, do you think you could get your father to meet with my class for a dinner talk?” I said I thought so, and quickly arranged it. John invited me, so I sat in on dad’s presentation on *Evaluating Training Programs*. Naturally he focused on the four levels. Much to my embarrassment, I was not even sure what they were: Reaction, Learning, Behavior, and Results. I knew they began with reaction and ended with results, but was a bit confused about the middle two.

I listened intently to that 45-minute talk and even took notes. I remember being impressed by two things. One was how simple and practical the four levels were. The other was how impressed his audience was with him and his presentation. I had been a psychologist for a number of years, a career consultant, and a management consultant, but for some reason hadn’t found it necessary to weave the four levels into my work.

I drove him to my house that night and asked him some followup questions on the way. As I was asking and he was answering, I started to piece together the beginnings of a plan to integrate his four levels into my work. I had begun working for First Indiana Bank in Indianapolis, Indiana, the previous year. First Indiana is an independent,

community bank of about 800 employees (we call them “associates”) that has since made a successful transition from a thrift to a national bank. In the six years since then, I have applied the four levels in many different ways at First Indiana.

I am currently the Director of First Indiana Bank’s Corporate University. My major responsibilities include our balanced scorecard management system, leadership development, associate and career development, training, process improvement, and recognition. I do find time and the need, however, to attend conferences on training and development, and frequently get to conduct workshops at those conferences, often with my father. The idea and material for this book comes from my work, those conferences and workshops, and most importantly, from Don.

The purpose of this book is twofold. First, it operationalizes Don’s book, *Evaluating Training Programs: The Four Levels* (second ed., Berrett-Koehler, 1998). It not only offers new ideas regarding evaluation, but utilizes the model in effectively implementing strategy by specifically linking and aligning training to strategy. Second, it uses the four levels as the foundation to attacking the specific challenge of transferring learning (Level 2) to behavior (Level 3). According to many training executives and trainers across the globe, this remains one of the top training challenges in organizations of all sorts. Specifically, it explains the challenge, then offers solutions from the authors as well as from professionals in varying kinds of organizations.

This book is outlined into four parts. Part One identifies and assesses the challenge of transferring learning to behavior. It begins with an overview of the four levels to set the foundation, reviews their use in the twenty-first century, then discusses the specific challenge. Of particular importance is the increasing pressure from senior executives and boards on training departments and corporate universities to demonstrate the bottom-line results that come from training. This pressure, along with economical challenges and technological opportunities, has forced us to view training from a new perspective. There is a worldwide movement toward converting training departments to corporate universities, and corporate trainers to internal business consultants. This offers not only challenges but also opportunities, thus expanding the role and importance of the four levels. Even with things changing so fast, the eons-old fact still exists that individuals and groups are more comfortable staying the same than changing. Thus, our challenge and this book.

Part Two details five foundations for success. It would be unfair and misleading to skip this part of the book and just move to specific solutions to transferring learning to behavior. I learned this lesson the hard way. In 1997, I was directed to lead First Indiana Bank into the world of Total Quality Management (TQM). I eagerly accepted the challenge and took over the leadership of our Total Quality Council and quickly developed corporate-wide courses in TQM. The principles of TQM are sound. My efforts were sincere. Hundreds of associates learned how to flowchart their work processes, set standards, and develop work flow improvement action plans. They were equally sincere in making it all work. Unfortunately, after months of hard work, it didn't "stick." Learning TQM principles and methods did not transfer to new behaviors and positive results. Several of the foundations for success were not present. The specific foundations presented are: a Strategic Focus, an Effective Change Management Model, the Right Kind of Leadership, an Effective Measurement System, and Success with Levels 1 and 2. You'll have to read into those chapters to discover just which ones were lacking that doomed our TQM implementation.

Part Three attacks the challenge. The basic premise is that two significant forces have to be balanced for this successful transfer, support and accountability. Examples of both are provided, along with a chapter entitled "The Glue to Hold It Together," which addresses feedback, coaching, and other followup methods to ensure success.

Finally, Part Four offers case studies from successful corporations and training leaders. They reveal foundational reasons for their success as well as specific best practices. A variety of types of organizations were selected, as was a great variance in scope, from the large corporation to the individual practicing trainer.

I wish to thank my wife, Denise, and my parents, Don and Fern Kirkpatrick, for their encouragement and guidance with the ideas in this book. I also want to thank Marni, Nancy, Marianne, and Tracy from First Indiana for modeling the way of great leadership and training practices; Sharon Spencer at First Indiana for her technical assistance with scorecards and graphs (only on her lunch hour!); friends and colleagues Dale Sears and John Galloway for their encouragement and significant text contributions; Scott Parry for the glowing foreword; the many reviewers and distinguished colleagues who offered kind words of suggestion and endorsement; and Steve Piersanti, President of Berrett-Koehler Publishers, for his continuous support and guidance.

Finally, I am grateful to the training leaders who provided best prac-



tice case studies that reflect their commitment to the field, training expertise, and generosity in sharing it with the rest of us.

James D. Kirkpatrick

**Note:** Obviously more challenges to improving performance exist than can be covered in one book. Therefore, we will soon be commencing the second in this series of attacking training and performance challenges. While the exact title is not yet set, it will focus on Level 4—generating, measuring, evaluating, and communicating results. We know that you—our professional colleagues—use a variety of methods to successfully meet the challenges of Level 4. We want this upcoming book to include what you as practitioners and consultants have found to be effective. Please e-mail us stories, cases, examples, methods, and tools that you have worked for you. One of us will get back to you and see if what you offer might offer a significant contribution to our book. Send your information to Jim at [jim.kirkpatrick@insightbb.com](mailto:jim.kirkpatrick@insightbb.com).

## PART I

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# THE FOUR LEVELS' BIGGEST CHALLENGE

Part One begins with Chapter 1, written by Don, as an overview of the Four Levels of Evaluating Training Programs—*Reaction*, *Learning*, *Behavior*, and *Results*. He covers the history of their development and how they are being applied today.

Chapter Two attacks the challenge—How can we as trainers and training managers carry forth the good training we offer employees to new behaviors and subsequent results? This challenge, of course, is huge, since we lose much of our influence as trainees return to their jobs. In other words, Levels 1 and 2 are within our control; Levels 3 and 4 are only within our influence.

Included in these chapters and throughout the book are case examples and best practices from Jim's own work and that of his colleagues. Many readers will be able to apply effectively the principles and methods outlined in Parts Two and Three. Others will benefit more from reading about real-life challenges and subsequent best practices in Part Four. Thus, the book is a balance of both.

## Chapter 1

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# The Four Levels in the 21st Century

In 1954, at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, I (Don) completed my PhD dissertation entitled “Evaluating a Human Relations Training Program for Supervisors.” Based on the dissertation, I wrote a series of four articles for the *T&D* of the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD): “Evaluating Reaction,” “Evaluating Learning,” “Evaluating Behavior,” and “Evaluating Results.”

At that time, training professionals were struggling with the word “evaluation.” There was no common language and no easy way to communicate what “evaluation” meant and how to accomplish it. Trainers began to accept my four levels and passed the word to others. Soon, it came to be called the “Kirkpatrick Model.” The concepts, principles, and techniques were communicated from one professional to another as trainers began to apply one or more of the levels.

In 1993, a training friend, Jane Holcomb, told me that trainers were talking about the four levels but couldn’t find the articles that had been written in 1959. She said, “Write a book!” So I decided to do it.

I realized trainers want to know more than the concepts, principles, and techniques. They want to know what other professionals were

doing to apply them. So I wrote the book in two parts. Part One contains a description of the levels, guidelines for each, and suggested forms and approaches. Part Two contains case studies of organizations that had applied one or more of the levels.

My first contact for a case study was Dave Basarab, who was responsible for evaluating training programs at Motorola. When I told him who I was, he replied, "Don Kirkpatrick? We use your four levels all over the world!" He was willing to write a case study and write the introduction to the book. He suggested my contacting Arthur Andersen and Intel for additional case studies. They were willing and suggested others. The first edition was published in 1994 and the second in 1998 with case studies from Motorola, Intel, Cisco, The Gap, First Union National Bank, Kemper Insurance, Duke Energy, the City of Los Angeles, St. Luke's Hospital, and the University of Wisconsin's Management Institute. The book has been a best seller and has been translated into Spanish, Polish, and Turkish.

My son Jim asked me, "How has your model changed since it was introduced in 1959?" I told him the model remains essentially the same. The concepts, principles, and techniques are as applicable today as they were when the model was first introduced. I am still getting requests from universities and professional and private organizations to present the four levels in keynote addresses at their conferences.

I have yet to receive a comment that they are out of date. The one major modification—or rather, addition—is Return on Investment or ROI that author and consultant Jack Phillips has called Level 5, separating it from Level 4. Even for those who agree with Phillips' thinking, my levels continue to be the basis for evaluation around the world.

At the 2004 national conference of ASTD, I was given the award for Lifetime Achievement in Workplace Learning and Performance to "recognize an individual for a body of work that has had significant impact on the field of workplace learning and performance." In announcing the award, ASTD stated, "Spare and elegant, the Kirkpatrick model has been the most widely used evaluation method for more than forty years. His plan is to continue communicating the four levels, and there is, no doubt, a new audience waiting to hear."

Here is a brief description of the four levels and the guidelines I have suggested.

## Level 1: Reaction

*How do trainees react to the program, or better, what is the measure of customer satisfaction?* Whether they attend a program where they have to pay a fee or attend an in-house program where only time is required, they are “customers.” Their reaction is important. In a situation where they pay, their reaction determines whether they attend again or recommend the training to others from their organization. Universities, professional organizations, and consultants who conduct these kinds of programs should be very interested in the reaction of participants. In an in-house situation, comments to others when participants return to their jobs have a major impact on future training programs and budgets.

Reactions of participants should be measured on all programs for two reasons: to let the participants know that trainers value their reactions, and to measure their reactions and obtain suggestions for improvement.

### Guidelines for Evaluating Reaction

1. Determine what you want to find out.
2. Design a form that will quantify reactions.
3. Encourage written comments.
4. Get 100 percent immediate response.
5. Develop an acceptable standard.
6. Measure reactions against the standard.

## Level 2: Learning

*To what extent has learning occurred?* Three things can be accomplished in a training program:

1. Understand the concepts, principles, and techniques being taught.
2. Develop and/or improve skills.
3. Change attitudes.

All programs have the objective of increasing the knowledge of the participants. Some programs also have the objective of increasing the

technical or sales skills of the participants. And some programs, such as "Diversity Training," are aimed at changing attitudes.

Learning evaluations should be targeted to the specific objectives of the program and should be used to evaluate all programs.

### **Guidelines for Evaluating Learning**

1. Measure knowledge, skill, and/or attitudes before and after the training.
2. Use a paper-and-pencil test for knowledge and attitudes.
3. Use a performance test for skills.
4. Get 100 percent response.
5. If practical, use a control group that does not receive the training to compare with the experimental group that receives the training.

### **Level 3: Behavior**

*To what extent has on-the-job behavior changed as a result of the program?* This is the most difficult to measure and probably the most important. If the trainees do not apply what they learned, the program has been a failure even if learning has taken place. Therefore, measuring behavior change is necessary, not only to see if behavior has changed, but also to determine the reasons why change has not occurred.

It would be an almost impossible task to evaluate all programs in terms of change in behavior. Therefore, a sampling approach should be used.

### **Guidelines for Evaluating Behavior**

1. If possible, evaluate on before and after training. It is usually impossible to do this, so it becomes necessary to do it after the program and determine what the participant is doing differently than he/she was doing before the program.
2. Allow time for the behavior to change.
3. Survey and/or interview one or more of the following:
  - a. The trainee
  - b. The bosses of the trainee

- c. The subordinates of the trainee
- d. Others who observe the behavior of the trainee
4. Get 100 percent response or a sampling.
5. Repeat at appropriate times.
6. Use a control group if practical.
7. Consider the cost of the evaluation versus the possible benefits.

## Level 4: Results

*To what extent have results occurred because of the training?* Results could be determined by many factors including less turnover, improved quantity of work, improved quality, reduction of waste, reduction in wasted time, increased sales, reduction in costs, increase in profits, and return on investment (ROI).

As in the case of evaluating behavior, evaluation should be done only on those programs considered most important or most expensive. It has been recommended that ROI should only be attempted on about 5 percent of an organization's programs.

## Guidelines for Evaluating Results

1. Measure on before and after training.
2. Allow time for possible results to take place.
3. Repeat at appropriate times.
4. Use a control group if practical.
5. Consider the cost of the evaluation versus the possible benefits.

## THE CHANGING ROLE OF TRAINING

This is a changing world we live in. *T&D*, American Society for Training and Development's monthly magazine, frequently discusses the changing trends in our industry. In the May 2004 issue, it notes, "During the past decade, workplace learning and performance professionals have faced corporate demands, economic uncertainty, and personal needs and dilemmas that have significantly affected their tasks and role. Trainers are now referred to as performance analysts. Instead of working full-time in large corporations, many have joined consulting organizations that outsource expertise. Instead of working in tradi-

tional roles of instructors, mentors, or coaches, they assist managers to become instructors, mentors, or coaches with their employees" (p. 48). The December 2003 issue is titled, "The Future of the Profession Formerly Known as Training." The articles basically talk about recent, rather drastic changes in the field of training. We've reached the point where many professionals don't even like to use the term *training* anymore. Corporate Universities are springing up all over the world. A friend and colleague of ours, Annick Renaud-Coulon, has organized a thriving Corporate University Club in Europe; Karen Barley, president of Corporate University Enterprise, has found the same in this country. This trend and the reasons behind it have led many companies to transition from a training department to a Corporate University.

Specifically, they tend to focus on two major aspects—comprehensive, cross-functional programs of study and a business consulting model. The programs of study ensure that employees at different levels and in different job groups get the exact training they need, as opposed to a hit-and-miss approach. The business consulting model allows for linking training with line-of-business needs. Together, they reinforce the pressure we all feel to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of training.

## CURRENT APPLICATIONS OF THE FOUR LEVELS

Even though I wrote my series of articles that gave birth to the four levels in 1959, their obvious use in evaluating training effectiveness remains relevant and vibrant today. The four levels serve more than the obvious purpose of evaluating training after the fact; they are a great model for developing programs.

I would like to point out a small notation in my book, *Evaluating Training Programs: The Four Levels*. In the last paragraph on page 14, I state, "... to ensure the effectiveness of a training program, time and emphasis should be put on the planning and implementation of the program." In other words, start with the end in mind. I know this to be a very common use of the four levels today.

The business consulting model for training is relevant here. Many training departments within organizations offer a variety of courses, from Time Management to Teambuilding to Sales Effectiveness, never being sure the courses actually align with an identified business need. Most savvy training leaders have a different approach. Instead of developing a training program or coaching intervention based on what they *think* the need is, they conduct a needs assessment with the line-



of-business leader in which they focus on the need, problem, or opportunity. This, of course, acts to align the new training with the actual business need.

Here is where the four levels enter the picture. Start with Level 4 (results) and determine with the line-of-business managers what needs to happen. Then, work backward with the question, "What behaviors (Level 3) need to be put into practice to achieve the desired results?" Then, ask, "What knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Level 2) will the targeted employees need to have to behave appropriately?" Follow by, "How will we get them to come to training and be receptive to these changes (Level 1)?"

Besides utilizing the four levels before and after training, they also come in handy *during* training. When I am conducting a workshop on the four levels, I regularly ask myself, "Are they with me? What can I do to improve their receptiveness and attention (Level 1)?" I also use methods to determine how well they are catching what I am pitching (Level 2). And I surely spend time in all my training to find out how participants plan to implement (Level 3) what they are learning, and how they will measure results (Level 4).

## FINAL THOUGHTS

Don't let the challenge of evaluating training overwhelm you. Many trainers I know start out with evaluating Level 1 until they are comfortable with it. Then they move on to Level 2 until they feel good about that, then on to Level 3 and Level 4. Also keep in mind that you don't have to get it perfect the first time through, and that using a sample of your trainee population can be very effective.

this material has been excerpted from

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