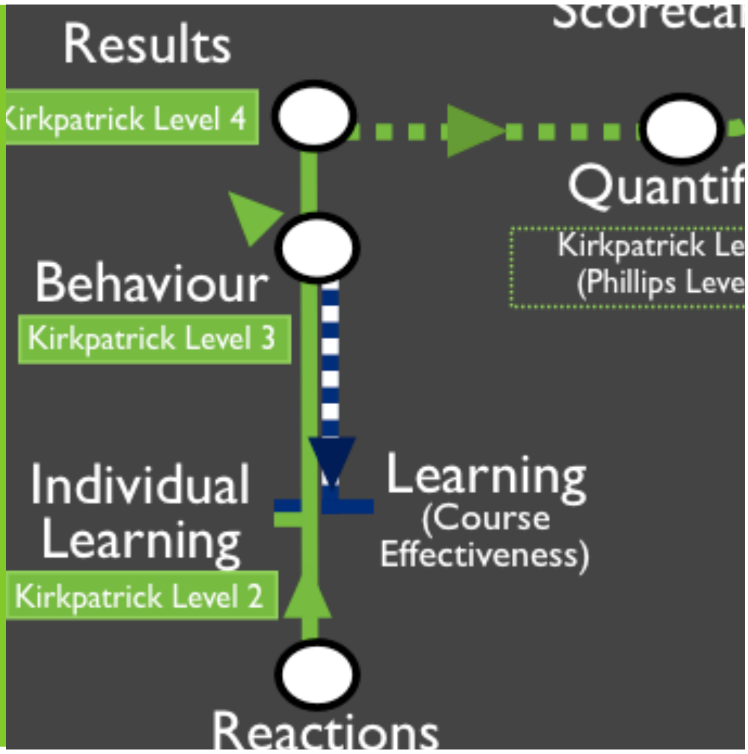
Kirkpatrick Revisited



Evaluating training using Kirkpatrick's "four levels" model still holds good after nearly 50 years, but there may be an easier way to cut to what most interested parties really want to know - how to make sense of the real impacts, the elusive levels 3 and 4.

The world's best known model for evaluating learning programmes hasn't stayed the course for nearly five decades for nothing.

The strength of the principles embodied in Donald Kirkpatrick's "four levels" model are beyond dispute - respectively assessing what course participants felt about training, what they learned, how this affected their working habits (behaviour) and ultimately what difference this has made to their organisation. However, what is open to question is the method he advocates for achieving these outputs. In Kirkpatrick's approach, getting to the real nub of what learning programmes are intended to deliver - real change in individuals' mindsets and behaviour, translating into positive business impacts - is held off like some nervous "dance of the seven veils." Yet starting an evaluating exercise by considering these key outcomes from training may actually save effort over Kirkpatrick's traditional approach.

To start with, there's no good reason why evaluating learning, behaviour and results for an organisation (levels 2 to 4) have to *procedurally* follow the customer satisfaction "happy sheet" exercise which commonly concludes a training course, even if chronologically this is usually what happens.

Kirkpatrick's argument is that we can't begin to make sense of whether, say, a lack of change in behaviour (level 3) is due to learning objectives (level 2) being missed, and therefore we must satisfy ourselves that this is the case first. Similarly, uncovering why an organisation has failed to register impacts from a particular training intervention needs to start with checking whether or not behaviour has changed, whilst a lack of learning can't really be looked into without first knowing what delegates thought of a course.

Of course cause-and-effect relationships between the different levels should exist - for example, learning performance is highly likely to be linked to individuals' perceptions of how well a course was structured and facilitated or the learning methods and case studies used for training. Similarly, behavioural change might be assumed to be a necessary pre-requisite for seeing business results, and learning a precursor of changed behaviour.

However, these may not be the only or even key reasons why performance at a succeeding level in the Kirkpatrick sequence falls short of what was hoped for. Conversely, if performance goals have been achieved, then we might not need to know whether learning and behavioural objectives have been met - it may be sufficient to assume that they have, at least to the level required to yield the results seen.

An alternative, time-effective approach may then be to start at "the top end" - in other words, to first question whether business impacts have been felt, and then to look back if expected outcomes have not been achieved.

It's also relevant to look back when positive results are apparent, again to understand what under-pins these results, with a view to validating the vital contribution of training.

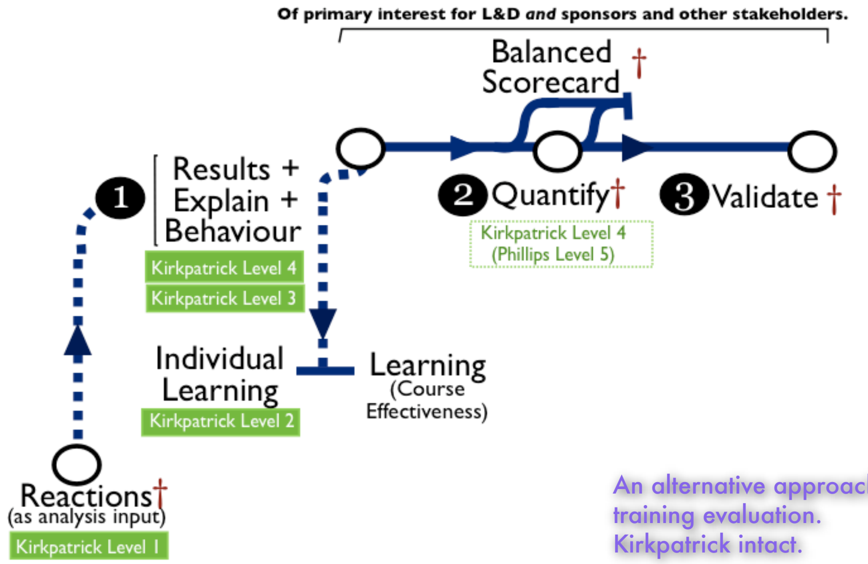
In practise, identifying what business results and behavioural changes have occurred can happen at the same time in data gathering - there is no need to physically separate these as different "levels", even if they are logically distinct.

Revisiting Kirkpatrick

The potential to improve on the "four levels" model has been considered by many. Jack Phillips, a contemporary and student of Kirkpatrick, argued that assessing return on investment (ROI) goes beyond examining an organisation's results, involving different activities and delivering what is ultimately quantified information.

Phillips' interpretation adds what is sometimes known as a "fifth level" to Kirkpatrick's original model, however for some, this is more a breakdown of level 4 than a discrete level in its own right. A little tautology may be at play here, however this probably isn't a very productive argument to worry about.

More recently, the CIPD commissioned research by Portsmouth University to support a *Change Agenda* in training evaluation. An initial phase of research sought to understand what Chief Executives



An alternative approach to training evaluation. Kirkpatrick intact.

and Learning and Development Managers felt about training evaluation. This concluded that pin-pointing exact financial ROI isn't upper-most amongst most CEO's concerns, but return on expectation (RoE) does play an important part. Unfortunately, the Portsmouth research doesn't go much beyond looking at RoE from the perspective of Chief Executives and L&D Managers, and so is limited to offering perceived and selected anecdotal evidence to match the "higher levels" in Kirkpatrick's model.

However, one area of contention this research does point to is the relevance of "ROI". There is wide-spread evidence to contradict the view that ROI isn't the big issue. Much of this confusion may stem from different definitions of the term: some emphasising financial returns, others applying a more general interpretation.

Limitations of the "four levels"

But Kirkpatrick's approach harbours several limitations.

At face value, the model assumes that training alone creates results, however, as we've observed, there may be a variety of reasons why changes are felt. For example, behaviour change may be influenced by individuals' confidence to push out of comfort zones, having opportunities to practise new skills and being supported after training by a coach or mentor, amongst other factors. Training rarely happens in a vacuum.

Another important aspect which is under-played in the four levels approach is understanding *why* a change has happened. Without a clear rationale, it's impossible to isolate the specific impacts of training, even following Kirkpatrick's sequential approach.

Evaluating learning is especially difficult - influenced by the timing of the assessment, the type of learning involved (recall, understanding or applying concepts), and the persistence of what is remembered against the onset of bad habits.
Consolidated learning is most likely when training links in with competency and performance frameworks, coaching and business plans. But recall and learning is often selective, especially in the long-term: how many non-mathematicians can remember Pythagorus' Theorem a year or two after leaving school, and how quickly do we get rusty on vocabulary if not regularly practising a second language?

A new kind of logic?

What then can be done to overcome these limitations, without sacrificing the good principles and benefits which a full evaluation a la Kirkpatrick offers?

We've already mentioned the benefits of turning Kirkpatrick on its head, cutting to the chase to identify what impacts have been felt by an organisation.

But there's also a need to break away from the rigid and exclusive cause-and-effect presumption of the four levels: keeping an open mind on *why* levels of performance are as they are, and being able to isolate the impacts of a specific intervention over others.

In rationalising impacts, it's reasonable to assume that we might look at behaviour first, but going back further to level 2 and level 1 then becomes a matter of what is appropriate: failure in learning is just one of a number of reasons why behavioural change may not have resulted, and our best starting point is to keep an open book on the possible reasons.

Similarly, level 1 analysis doesn't necessarily need to feed into an analysis of the consequences of training, although as an independent exercise, this does offer an early warning if all is not well. Training Managers need to know if delegates walk away from courses feeling dissatisfied, and logically this feedback needs to be collected during or soon after a course has run.

By building on Kirkpatrick's approach with a fresh pair of eyes, rather than re-writing the rules on training evaluation, L&D Managers can put themselves in pole position when it comes to explaining what training delivers.

Reference: *"Evaluating Training Programs, The Four Levels"* (Second edition), Donald L. Kirkpatrick, Berrett-Koehler Publishers Inc., 1998

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