

# Leveraging the Kirkpatrick Model

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## Validation vs Evaluation

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*The Kirkpatrick Model is well-known in the training community. It is viewed primarily as a tool for use in evaluating training. However, it can also be used as a tool for validating requests for training. This paper shows how.*

Everyone in the training business knows about the Kirkpatrick Model (see Figure 1). It is typically used to evaluate training after the fact. However, the Kirkpatrick Model can also be used up front to establish the *expected* impact and value of training. Let's briefly review the four levels of the Kirkpatrick Model and then look at how the model might be used to establish the expected impact and value of training.

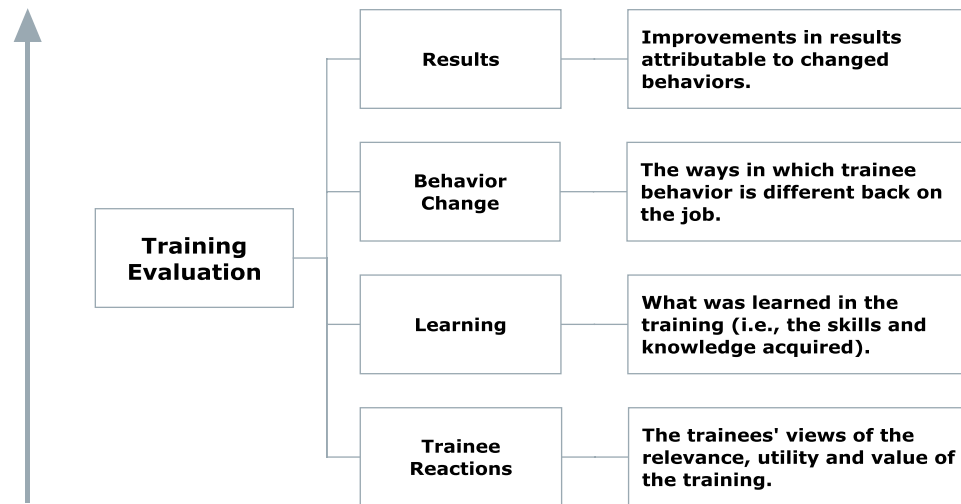


Figure 1 – Evaluation View of the Kirkpatrick Model

## The Four Levels

### Reactions

This, the first “level” of the Kirkpatrick Model, is also known somewhat pejoratively as “the smiles test.” Basically, it consists of information about the trainees’ perceptions of the training: Do they see it as useful? Was their time well spent? Did the instructor know what he or she was doing? All kinds of questions are asked and answered as part of evaluating training at this level of the Kirkpatrick Model. Roundly criticized, often on the basis that trainees are hardly qualified to evaluate training or trainers, the “smiles test” is subjected not just to criticism but also to ridicule. Yet, consider this: A training course that consistently and repeatedly fails the “smiles test” is in deep trouble. If trainees uniformly and consistently dislike or claim that a particular training session (or instructor) is of little or no value to them, it is doomed. The “smiles test” must be passed.

### Learning

This level deals with the acquisition of skill and knowledge during the training, usually as evidenced by en-route and end-of-course assessments. Can the trainees do what they’re being trained to do? When used in conjunction with pre-tests, this kind of assessment can do a reliable job of determining if the training course or session is achieving its learning objectives. It is, then, a reasonably good measure of

the efficacy of the training. Enter here, however, the bugaboo of many a training course; the issue known as “transfer of training” – that is, did what was learned in the training transfer to the job and result in behavior change there? That leads to the next level in the Kirkpatrick Model.

### **Behavior**

Behavior change on the job is indeed another important measure; however, it is as much or more a measure of two other factors than it is of training itself. One factor is the extent to which the job environment supports applying what was learned and the second factor is the applicability and utility of what was learned. The so-called “transfer of training” issue draws attention to the very factors that gave rise to what is now known as human performance technology. Way, way back in the early days of programmed instruction, some folks at the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan were puzzled by some findings; namely, they could establish without any doubt that the learners were learning what was being taught via programmed instructional materials yet that which was learned was not showing up on the job. Investigation into what was originally viewed as a transfer of training problem revealed numerous factors in the workplace that prevented trainees from applying what they had learned. Lack of or contrary incentives, task interference, and lack of feedback could prevent people from doing what they had learned to do. In addition to these factors, it also was the case from time to time that what was learned really didn’t have any application on the job. There was no transfer of training because there was no use for what had been learned. That led to the now widespread notion that training should be employed only when there is abundant evidence from some kind of front-end analysis that there are indeed problems of performance that owe to a lack of knowledge or skill and, further, that the job environment requires and will be supportive of what is being learned.

### **Results**

Okay; behavior changes; so what? The final level of the Kirkpatrick Model focuses on results in the workplace. These might be operational such as reduced errors or increased productivity and they might be financial such as reduced costs or increased sales. But for training to lay claim to the credit for any results in the workplace there is a bridge that must be constructed spanning the gap between behavior changes and business results. Joe now does things differently? Just how do the changes in Joe’s behavior lead to improved business results? Finding the links between changes in human behavior and changes in business results can be a taxing and difficult task. It requires being able to identify the linkages connecting the two and that requires being able to work your way through the performance architecture of the organization in question.

Now, let’s turn the Kirkpatrick Model around and see how we can use it to our advantage. And let’s start with the ROI of training.

### **Turning the Kirkpatrick Model Around**

Recent years have seen increasing pressure to show the business results of training, especially its ROI. This is seen as a difficult challenge by some trainers but, for some, it is viewed as a blessing in disguise. Demonstrating the bottom-line payoffs of training can afford trainers an opportunity to break out of the box in which many other organizational denizens have placed them. It can open the door for trainers to

legitimately look into issues previously off limits or out of bounds. Some trainers can use it to expand the scope of their efforts and the scale of their impact. And, some can leverage it to advance their own careers and standing in the eyes of their management.

The key idea being put forth here is one of moving evaluation from the back end of an effort to the front end (see Figure 2). When a request for training comes in, the response to the request can and should begin with the requirements for the kind of evaluation that will be needed later to determine the value of any training subsequently delivered. The Kirkpatrick Model is a good tool to use for this purpose. The key to using the Kirkpatrick Model as a device for establishing the expected value of training is to turn it around, to reverse the order of its elements.

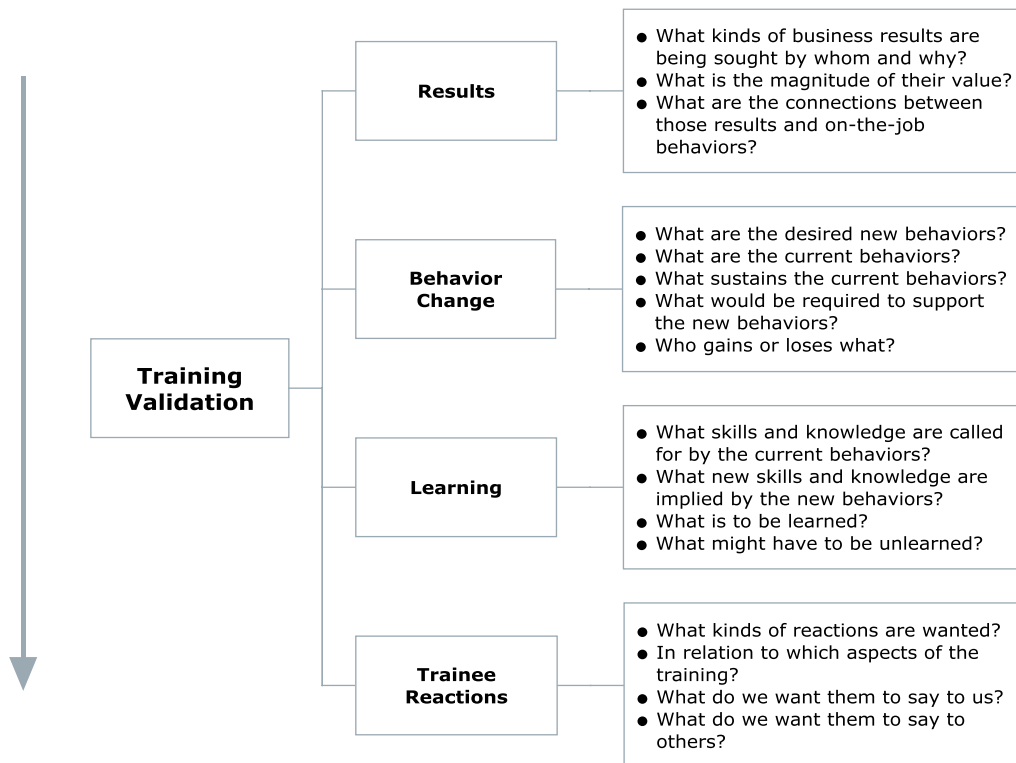


Figure 2 – Validation View of the Kirkpatrick Model

When you go to the first meeting to discuss a request for training, go armed with the validation version of the Kirkpatrick Model. Point out that the model will guide the later evaluation of the training and that it is also useful in framing training projects. The main difference between now and later is that after-the-fact evaluations typically work their way up the levels from reactions through learning and on-the-job behavior changes to business results. At the outset of a training project, it's best to reverse the

order of the levels. Start by asking about the business results to be affected. Next, ask about the kinds of changes in on-the-job behavior necessary to produce those results. Point out that behavior on the job is a function of the individual (e.g., skill, knowledge and ability) and the individual's working environment (e.g., feedback, support, task interference, etc). Also point out that training can address only any skill and knowledge deficiencies. Environmental influences will have to be addressed via other means. Discuss which of the desired changes in on-the-job behavior likely owe to skill and knowledge deficiencies and which likely owe to environmental factors. Inquire as to how any environmental factors affecting on-the-job behavior will be identified and addressed. Encourage the assignment of responsibility to look into the environmental factors and volunteer for that assignment. Use any suspected skill and knowledge deficiencies to tentatively frame the learning objectives for the training. Finally, for any training that seems warranted, ask the requester what kinds of reactions he or she would like to see from the trainees (e.g., indications of on-the-job situations where it applies, questions and concerns about whether or not it does apply, identification of possible obstacles or barriers to applying it, estimates of the degree of support needed and the degree of support likely to exist, etc). In other words, reframe the reactions level so that it provides more useful information.

### **Summary**

In summary, use the Kirkpatrick Model not just as a back-end evaluation framework but also as a front-end validation framework. Use it to clarify, analyze, verify and validate requests for training. On the back end, the logic of the Kirkpatrick Model flows from trainee reactions through learning and on-the-job behavior change to results. On the front end, at a project's outset, reverse that flow; start with the expected business results and work your way backward through behavior change to learning to trainee reactions. Leverage the Kirkpatrick Model to your advantage.

### **About the Author**

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