An Integrated Evaluation Model for HRD

If you evaluate your HRD programs only after the fact, you may miss the chance to nip problems in the bud. This integrated approach ties evaluation into every part of the HRD process.

By ROBERT O. BRINKERHOFF

Imagine this scenario: An HRD director is sitting in her office when the telephone rings. It is the chairman of the board, who says, "Say, some of the other directors and I were just sitting around, and one of them asked if all the fancy HRD programs we have around here actually do something and whether it makes any difference. Seemed like an interesting question, so we decided to ask you to sort of drop by, say sometime in the next 10 minutes, and just bring along any data you have that shows what we get out of our HRD effort. We're up in . . . Hello? Hello? . . . Are you there? . . . Hello?"

This fictitious scene highlights what I think is a common and unfortunate condition in HRD today: the HRD manager up the creek without an all-in-one model for measuring program quality.

That's a tall order, but such a model *does* exist. It's an evaluation system that integrates with needs analysis, design, and delivery. Armed with information produced by this model, our heroine could have raced gleefully up to the chairman's office with an armload of convincing data. More to the point, had she been using this model, the chairman never would have called in the first place, for the HRD director would have asked and answered many times over the chairman's very good question.

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Yesterday's evaluation system

There is no doubt that the HRD profession is enjoying the best of times—never before have organizations invested so heavily in our services. And in such good times, it can be difficult to think of evaluation and accountability. Most of us are too busy serving the next client's demands to bother to see whether the last client benefitted. But as the HRD profession does more, promises more, and inevitably requires more resources to support itself, we need—now more than ever—comprehensive and effective evaluation approaches.

In 1967 Donald L. Kirkpatrick proposed a four-step model that has, in many respects, provided a sound and simply understood conceptual base for evaluating HRD programs. Appearing as part of the *Training and Development Handbook*, edited by R.L. Craig and L.R. Bittel, Kirkpatrick's model very clearly articulates four levels of outcome for any training session. Each level, he wrote, demands separate evaluation: Did trainees react favorably to the training—did they like it? Did trainees learn? Did trainees use what they learned? Did using the learning make a difference? This definition of four levels of outcome is extremely useful, for it pushes the focus of evaluation beyond mere favorable reactions and learning to where it rightfully belongs: on payoff to the organization.

Yet I find important shortcomings with the Kirkpatrick model. First, its definition of HRD covers training only, programs in which trainees learn discrete skills that transfer readily to the workplace, produc-

ing immediate results. Today's HRD efforts are much broader than that.

Consider, for example, applying the four-step model to a program teaching people how to save lives by using CPR techniques. Barring a workplace heart attack, we would find no on-the-job application of the skill learned. Does this failure to detect broad third-level effects negate the value of the program? Probably not, so we need a different way to evaluate this program properly. Some HRD programs that do not produce behavioral results may nonetheless have value. Others may deserve to be thrown out. We need an evaluation process to help us decide not only which programs to keep and which to discard, but also how to revise those we keep to make them more cost effective. The Kirkpatrick model's narrow focus prevents us from doing this.

The Kirkpatrick model is entirely outcome oriented, reflecting a legitimate bottom-line bias. Yet there are many reasons to be concerned with evaluating HRD programs as they happen, well before they have had a chance to produce results. In fact, to look for effects only after the program is to perpetuate trial-and-error learning. If evaluation during the early developmental stages can show that a program is ill conceived or poorly executed, then there may be good reason to revise or even abort it. Evaluation made part of the program development process can *help* programs succeed, as well as measure whether or not they do.

We need to think about evaluation just as we think about any other portion of the

HRD process. No professional would conduct a workshop without telling participants where and when it is. Yet, how many of us plan and conduct HRD programs without communicating criteria for their success to upper management? Or without reporting the programs' impact to our bosses or bosses' bosses?

The logic of HRD

An evaluation system such as the six-stage evaluation model presented below must be part of the entire HRD process; it must tie into program planning, development, and operation. Evaluation begins at the outset, when HRD is first considered, and continues throughout the remainder of the process. To understand how the six-stage model works and how it meshes with the rest of the HRD process, we need to examine the logic of HRD.

I believe that all HRD programs should be designed to produce beneficial results on an organizational level. A sales training program, for example, should not simply train salespeople. It should increase sales volume, open new markets, or have some other positive effect on the company's goals. All programs should share the same logic: trainees go through training in order to learn something that will eventually benefit the organization.

The six stages

This basic logic suggests six stages of HRD program development and operation:
■ **Stage 1.** A need, problem, or opportunity worth addressing exists that could be influenced favorably by someone learning something.
■ **Stage 2.** An HRD program capable of teaching the needed something is designed or located.
■ **Stage 3.** The organization successfully implements the designed program.
■ **Stage 4.** The participants exit the program after successfully acquiring the intended skills, knowledge, or attitudes.
■ **Stage 5.** The participants retain and use their new learning.
■ **Stage 6.** The organization benefits when participants retain and use their learning.

Analyzing an HRD program in terms of these six stages can show whether and how programs benefit an organization. This analysis also helps trace any failures to one or more of the six stages.

Program failures could derive from flawed logic. Trainees might learn and learn well, but conditions on the job could

Figure 1—Six-stage model for evaluating HRD

	Evaluation Stage	Key Evaluation Questions	Some Useful Procedures
I.	**Goal Setting** (What's the need?)	—How great is the need, problem, or opportunity? —Is it amenable to HRD solutions? —Would the HRD difference be worth making? —Would HRD work and be likely to pay off? —Are criteria available to judge whether it paid off or not? —Is HRD better than alternative approaches?	Organizational audits; performance analyses; records analysis; observation; surveys; study of research; document reviews; context studies
II.	**Program Design** (What will work?)	—What kind of HRD might work best? —Is design A better than design B? —What's wrong with design C? —Is the selected design good enough to go with?	Literature review; expert reviews; panels checklists; site visits; pilot tests; participant review.
III.	**Program Implementation** (Is it working?)	—Is it installed as it is supposed to be? —Is it working on schedule? —What problems are cropping up? —What really took place? —Did they like it? —What did it cost?	Observation; checklists; trainer and trainee feedback; records analysis.
IV.	**Immediate Outcomes** (Did they learn it?)	—Did they learn it? —How well did they learn it? —What did they learn?	Knowledge and performance tests; observation; simulations; self-reports; work sample (product) analyses.
V.	**Intermediate or Usage Outcomes** (Are they keeping and/or using it?)	—How are they using it? —What part(s) of it are they using?	Self, peer, and supervisor reports; case studies; surveys; site visits; observation; work-sample analysis.
VI.	**Impacts and Worth** (Did it make a worthwhile difference?)	—What difference does using it make? —Has the need been met? —Was it worth it?	Organizational audits; performance analyses; records analysis; observation; surveys; document reviews; panel reviews and hearings; cost/benefit comparison.

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still conspire against skills transfer, preventing trainees from using their learning. Perhaps trainees learn and use their learning; even so, poor initial needs analysis at Stage 1 could have misidentified the problem, making the chosen intervention irrelevant.

HRD failures might also result from flawed operations. If, for instance, an unskilled trainer ran the program participants might not learn and the effort would fail. Sloppy follow-up could discourage retention and use of the learning, squelching potential benefits.

The logic of the new model

The six-stage evaluation model follows traditional HRD logic. It emphasizes evaluation—defined as the collecting of information to facilitate decision making. Evaluation, for example, can help HRD staff decide at Stage 1 whether the problem or opportunity is worth addressing in the first place, and whether the assump-

decisions about whether to cease, continue, curtail, or expand HRD programs. Figure 1 summarizes the model's six stages and lists several data-collection procedures useful during each of the stages.

Articulation

Using the six-stage model requires articulating the assumptions about why and how each HRD activity is supposed to work. Without such articulation, comprehensive evaluation is impossible. And with such articulation, HRD practitioners and consumers can define and clarify expectations.

The broad view

The success of an HRD effort in producing results of value to the organization depends on the quality of the decision making at each of the six stages listed

the crucial developmental stages of HRD programs, from assumptions about needs and potential payoff; through design; to implementing, debugging, and controlling program operations. These stages cast the die that determine payoff. Outcome evaluation alone can improve neither programs nor results. To this end, the six-stage model emphasizes a formative evaluation role and encourages the recycling of evaluative information from and to each of the six stages. In this way, all programs are *made* to work as best they can, and good programs are made even better.

Finally, of course, careful evaluation at all six stages enables HRD practitioners to educate HRD customers about their trade and practice, and enables them to justify their existence. Expectations at each stage are clarified, and accountability and effectiveness can be assessed and reported.

An HRD practitioner who uses the six-stage model can convincingly tell management, "The training we do is important and needed! The training designs we use are the best available! The training we run operates smoothly and people like it! People learn what we teach! What we teach lasts, and gets used! And our training pays off!"

Wouldn't it be nice if all HRD practitioners could make these claims? Shouldn't we all be able to?

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tions about causes of the problem are accurate and sound. Thus, evaluation at Stage 1 is needs assessment. Remember, deciding whether or not a training need exists is essentially a value-laden, judgmental process.

At Stage 2, evaluation can help a trainer decide whether a training design is sound enough or which of several competing alternatives will work best. Once a program is underway, Stage 3 evaluation procedures can help a trainer decide whether the program operates as intended and whether it really produces the desired results.

Deciding whether and how much trainees have learned is clearly an evaluative activity at Stage 4. At Stage 5, evaluation can assess retention, endurance, and learning transfer. Here it can also begin to track the complex process by which HRD accomplishes its objectives.

Finally, Stage 6 evaluation provides the input for making value decisions. Was the HRD program worthwhile? Did it accomplish its organizational goals? What other value did it produce? Answers to these questions are crucial to making good

above. Mistaken needs assumptions, for example, can make entire programs worthless. Many critics of the human relations training popular in the late sixties and early seventies blame the failure of these programs to improve productivity on failed needs analyses. Deciding to implement an HRD program with a critical design flaw or requiring trainees to remain in a program long after they have mastered content can seriously jeopardize the opportunity for the program's payoff.

The six-stage model forces a view of HRD in an organizational context and requires HRD professionals to articulate the logic of any program, from its roots in desired organizational benefit to its final payoff. The six-stage model precludes defining a program as successful because it is popular, or because it is easy to teach, or because it uses state-of-the-art technology. Careful attention to stages 4, 5, and 6 of this model keeps the HRD practitioner focused on the proper elements of HRD results and recognizes organizational impact as the final arbiter of worth.

The six-stage model also emphasizes