Getting Real about Evaluation

Typical evaluations underestimate results. Here's how to leverage your best achievements.

By Robert O. Brinkerhoff

AS WORKPLACE TRAINING and performance professionals, we know the value of our work. Our clients, however, are often highly skeptical. And when there is pressure on resources, we usually get the short end of the budget stick.

To prove our worth, we need to provide valid evidence of training's impact on our organization's bottom line. By addressing some basic concepts and using straightforward inquiry methods, we can uncover, measure, and document results; make a compelling report to senior leaders; and improve training impact and bottom-line results.

Before you get started on your next evaluation project, consider these two realities about training programs and some suggestions on how to handle them. They must be dealt with effectively because they dramatically influence the way we evaluate training.

Reality one: Training yields predictable results

In evaluating hundreds of training programs, my colleagues and I have noticed a consistent and easily overlooked phenomenon: Training programs produce reliable results. A typical training program creates some people who put their training to use and generate valuable results, such as increased sales or improved quality. They also create a percentage of people who are not able to or didn't try to use their training at all. The bulk of participants, however, fall in between the two extremes: They may try out something new on the job, have trouble, and eventually gravitate back to their old behaviors.

When there is a range of effects in an evaluation, scores at the high end will be offset by scores at the low end. This means that the typical training program will have, on average, quite mediocre results. So, a typical quantitative methods approach (measure everyone and divide by the total number of participants) will always and inevitably underestimate the impact of the training.

Deal with and leverage the predictable results. Seek out, measure, and analyze the best training results. That way, you and your organization can decide how worthwhile a particular training program is based on those results. If no one can use the training for positive outcomes, then get rid of it. But, if it works for some of the people, some of the time, and those people help produce valuable results, then you know you have a potentially worthwhile learning investment.

The next step is to figure out how to help more people use it as well as those few who used it best. For example, one major Fortune 200 company found out that just one person used new skills acquired in a training program to grow operating income by $1.8 million. Imagine what this company could have gained if it helped more participants use their learning—even a fraction as well—as this successful individual.

We can learn a lot from these extreme groups. We can measure, for example, how much impact an initiative produces when its learning is used on the job. If results are good, then we know that the training has great potential for a high return-on-investment. In addition, if the training produces worthwhile results among a small number of participants, then we can construct a defensible business case for investing time and resources to extend the program to others.

Reality two: Training alone never works

Training alone is never the sole cause of its success or failure. There is always something else at work—usually some performance system factors, such as su-pervisory support or preparation for learning—that enhances or impedes its effects. About 80 percent of training failures are not caused by flawed interventions. They are caused by contextual and performance system factors that were not aligned with the intended performance outcomes. Consequently, when we evaluate *training* impact, in reality we are evaluating an organization's performance management system.

Address the reality. Don't try to single out the sole effect of the training program. Doing so is futile from a methodological perspective and strategically counterproductive. Typical Level 3 surveys of learning application of all participants produce discouraging results: They predictably show that most trainees have not applied or sustained use of their learning. That does nothing to promote our cause and does not tell us why the results occurred.

Instead, leverage the fact that training never works alone or in a vacuum. Use evaluations and follow-ups to uncover the critical performance system factors that helped or hindered the performance results. Then, turn that knowledge into recommendations for increasing performance in later training efforts.

Recently we discovered that almost all new financial advisors who successfully applied their learning and gained good financial results had also made use of additional resources that helped them practice new skills on the job. We also discovered that nearly all of those successful advisors sought and received feedback from a manager or peer. That information led us to conclude that the training was unlikely to achieve positive results without such additional interactions, and to recommend that additional time and opportunities be provided in the future.

Provide the feedback to the people who can use—and need—it. First, conduct a brief survey to see if participants used their training to achieve results. Second, con-

duct interviews with a small sample of the successful participants. Find out exactly what they did, how they did it, and what documented results they have. Also, find out what helped them put their learning to use. Then, conduct some interviews with a sample of people who reported that they did not use their training. Find out what went wrong and what performance system factors hindered their application of learning.

Tell the story. Report the most dramatic examples of the training results and stress their business value. Inform managers of their participants' achievements, what they missed out on, and the value that was "left on the table" from people not using the training.

Based on the best success stories, make suggestions for future initiatives. Use your data to make a business case for taking specific and concrete actions to support training.

Finally, applaud the achievements that the participants and their managers reached as a result of teamwork. Don't try to take credit for this as a training success. Instead, make it perfectly clear that participants and managers working together made it pay off.

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