Using Evaluation to Build Organizational Performance and Learning Capability: A Strategy and a Method

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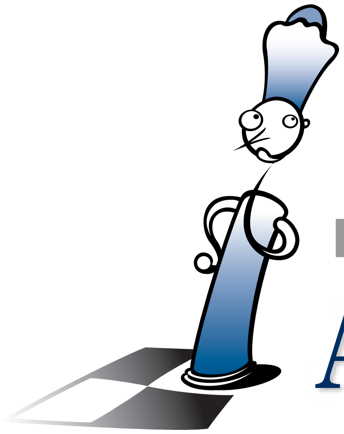

Using Evaluation to Build Organizational Performance and Learning Capability: A Strategy and a Method

by Robert O. Brinkerhoff and Dennis Dressler

More than ever organizations need to achieve the very best training and performance improvement possible. Today's competitive environment requires a workforce that cannot only learn quickly, but that can rapidly and consistently transform new learning into enhanced individual, team, and organizational performance. Thoughtful, efficient, and constructive evaluation is at the heart of continuous improvement and is vital to unlocking the desperately needed potential of learning for performance improvement.

Evaluation is itself a tool that can be constructively applied to help organizations learn on the job how to leverage every last ounce of learning and performance improvement from their training investments. But this sort of return on evaluation investment will not happen automatically. Nor will the challenge be met by more or better use of the traditional four-level evaluation model (Kirkpatrick's approach to evaluation that measures participant reaction, learning, transfer of skills, and the impact of training on organizational results—see Figure 1). What is needed is a thoughtful and constructive evaluation strategy that closely integrates performance improvement principles and methods.

The Challenge: Building Impact Capability

It is almost a certain guarantee that no training initiative will achieve 100% impact. When we assess the extent to which learning is being used in ways that affect business results, we will always find that there are three categories of impact:

- Some extreme portion of the trainees are indeed using their training in highly effective ways.
- A similar but opposite extreme portion is not using any new learning at all.
- Everyone else is somewhere in between, trying out bits of the training here and there, with variable success.

The causes of this variability of impact have more to do with the performance system and organizational environment factors than they do with factors inherent in the training design and content itself. Sometimes it is the training program itself that accounts for variable success, but this is rarely so. Consider the following to illustrate this proposition.

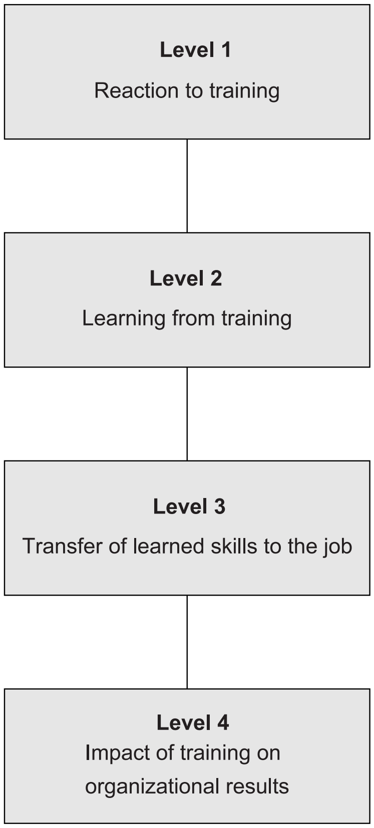

Figure 1. Four-Level Training Evaluation.

Imagine that one company purchases and implements a well-known and high-quality leadership skills training program. Further, imagine that this company gets excellent results from the training; many employees apply the skills in useful and impactful ways. Now imagine that another company buys and implements the same vendor-supplied program and achieves virtually no results at all. This example is a reality, of course, and is played out day after day, year after year, in organizations worldwide. We have found it time and again in the many evaluation projects we conduct. The same reality applies even within the same company. One business unit might use the program with great success, while another business unit has no success. Clearly, the training program itself is not the major factor in success. What accounts for the difference is the manner in which the company (or business unit) uses the training, as well as the influence of the prevailing cultural and systemic factors (such as work habits, reward systems, preparedness of learners, measures, and feedback procedures, to name a few).

These systemic factors are owned by the management systems and leadership of the organization and cannot be directly manipulated by learning leaders or training departments. We summarize these organizational cultural and systemic factors that influence training success into a single construct that we call the organization's learning capability. It is a major mission of the learning function to develop the organization's learning capability. And evaluation is one of the principal tools leaders can use to accomplish this mission: building and strengthening learning capability so that organizations reap continuously better results from their learning investments. Traditional approaches to training evaluation, however, are not likely to contribute effectively to this mission.

Evaluation and Organizational Learning Capability

The traditional four-level training evaluation framework was introduced by Donald Kirkpatrick, (1976) and more recently extended by Jack Phillips (1997) to include an additional level focusing on return on investment (ROI).

For years, the Kirkpatrick evaluation model has been the primary driver of training evaluation in business and corporate settings. Evaluation at the first level (measuring participant reactions to training) has become so widespread that it is a standard element of almost every training initiative.

Perhaps because of their perceived difficulty, and perhaps because Kirkpatrick called them *levels*, which implies an ordinal relationship, the higher levels of the model have taken on the aura of a quest unto themselves.

In our experience, many training organizations and practitioners are pursuing evaluation without an explicitly articulated strategy, as if it were an end in itself. They assume that evaluation at the higher levels will lead to good things, that it might build credibility for training, earn support for training budgets, and so forth.

Risks of an Implicit Evaluation Strategy

Pursuing the higher levels of Kirkpatrick's evaluation model without careful forethought poses three essential and significant risks:

- It undermines performance partnerships with line management by misrepresenting the role and process of training in performance improvement.
- It ignores the performance system factors that impinge on training impact.
- It fails to provide accurate and relevant feedback that managers, the customers of training, need to guide performance improvement.

Risk 1: Traditional Impact Evaluation Undermines Management Partnerships

As training and performance improvement professionals, we frequently encounter line managers who order training as a solution for complex performance system issues. These managers' wishes for training as a magical silver bullet for performance impact are understandable but nonetheless pose significant problems for training professionals.

The reality is that training is not a magic silver bullet. Training produces only capability, not performance. People who acquire new capability must then transform their learning into new behaviors, which can then lead to improved performance, and finally to business impact, such as better quality products, improved customer satisfaction, and reduced costs. But any number of performance system factors can, and often do, derail the transformation of learning into performance results.

Senior and supervisory management own the many performance system factors that threaten results. Given this fact of performance life, training practitioners have worked hard to overcome the silver bullet myth, seeking to forge a partnership strategy with other key roles in the organization. As these others hold the keys to the performance system, their active and cooperative participation is essential for training to work. The very essence of the partnership strategy is a clear message from training: *We cannot do this alone. Without you (the rest of the key players), training cannot succeed.*

But the typical impact evaluation and ROI approaches send quite different messages. First, these approaches are inappropriately referred to as the evaluation of training. In considering the Kirkpatrick model more closely, it becomes apparent that the term training applies only at the first and second levels of evaluation. Therefore, at Level Three and beyond, when we evaluate whether trainees are using their learning, we are no longer evaluating training; we are evaluating the larger performance improvement process in which training plays only a small role.

Furthermore, because impact evaluation and ROI methods are rooted in the decades-old research methods of quantitative analysis and experimental design, there is a methodological imperative to somehow tease out and isolate the effect of the training alone. But this demand for the independent effect of training flies directly in the face of everything we know about performance improvement and systems thinking! On the one hand, we in the training practice are trying desperately to create a systems-based, partnership-focused approach to performance improvement that involves cross-functional networking with the many key players in the performance system. Why then would we want to turn this mental model upside down and invest evaluation energy to somehow isolate and prove just the part that training played?

Methods that seek to claim training credit for impact, and that do not recognize the vital contributions of other players in the performance process, are divisive and exacerbate political isolation of the training function. Improving individual, team, and business performance must remain the central focus of training practitioners, and we must work doggedly to create the internal alliances necessary to work systemically. We cannot afford to send mixed messages about what it takes to accomplish our mission; nor can we afford to divert resources into evaluation initiatives that are not aligned with it.

Risk 2: Lack of Focus on Performance System Factors

The effects of the prevailing performance system are consistently powerful and predictable. As we have already noted, the business impact that training leads to is more a factor of the performance system and organizational culture than it is the learning intervention alone. Despite this truth, that the greatest determinant of impact is the performance system, the four-level framework does not guide inquiry directly to the performance environment, nor does it aim to identify and assess the most critical performance factors that make the difference between success and failure. In other words, this sort of evaluation can be used to defend and take credit for behavioral change, but it provides no focused inquiry into what factors in the performance environment enabled or impeded that usage. Nor does it provide information that could be used to identify and recognize the key players who had a major role in the success or failure to achieve results.

Risk 3: Evaluation Feedback Goes to the Wrong People

Senior leadership and supervising managers are the owners of the performance environment. Senior management is responsible for the organizational structure, policies, and procedures that provide the overall performance system architecture. Supervising managers hold the keys to ongoing performance improvement because they are responsible for the day-to-day coaching and other performance management activities that most shape behavior. But the traditional four-level framework focuses on training. It is conceived to provide feedback primarily to the training function as if it alone were responsible for performance improvement and essentially ignores the larger performance system.

If we want to evaluate transfer or behavioral change from training, we must evaluate the managerial and performance system, not training. The primary feedback channel should be to the owners of the performance system: line management and senior leadership. If we are really serious about improving the performance that training can contribute to, then we need to be equally serious about getting all the players in the performance process involved. It makes no sense for the training function to accept responsibility for training transfer by creating and disseminating follow-up surveys that assess usage of learning, when the principal feedback channel is to the training function.

Redefining an Evaluation Strategy for Performance Improvement

The central challenge for organizations today is how to leverage learning consistently, quickly, and effectively into improved performance. This is a whole organization challenge, not one the training function can accomplish alone.

An evaluation framework that responds to this challenge must focus on three primary questions:

- How well is our organization using learning to drive performance improvement?
- What is our organization doing that facilitates performance improvement from learning that needs to be maintained and strengthened?
- What is our organization doing, or not doing, that is impeding performance improvement?

These key questions are embedded in an evaluation strategy with the overall purpose of building organizational capability to increase the performance and business value of training investments. This strategy is essentially an organizational learning approach that is aligned with the overall training mission, which is likewise to build organizational capability through learning. In other words, evaluation becomes an additional learning intervention that strengthens the training function's arsenal. Systematic evaluation of training serves as a sort of on-the-job training approach, which is aimed at teaching managers how to leverage performance and business results from learning. Figure 2 graphically represents this organizational capability-building evaluation strategy.

The box at the top of the figure represents evaluation inquiry focused on one or more of the three critical questions. The results of this evaluation then are communicated through two major channels. The left-hand channel represents the flow of information to management. Since managers are the owners of the performance improvement process, the information to them focuses on application of learning by their direct reports and identification of performance system factors that impinge on training application. The purpose of this feedback is twofold. First, it indicates the sort of return

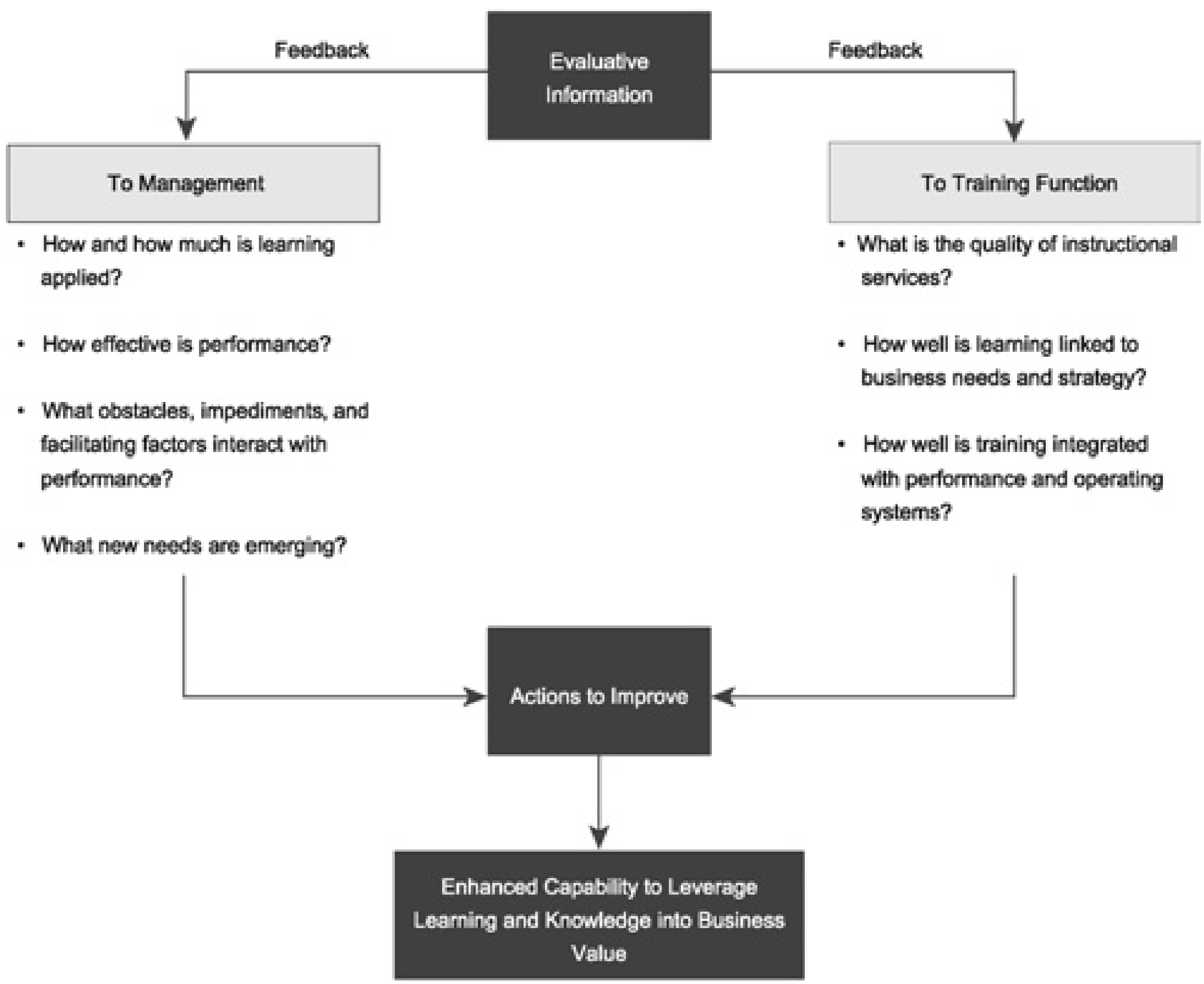

Figure 2. Evaluation as Capability Building.

that they, as customers of training, are realizing from their training investments. Second, it helps make them more aware of how well they are doing in helping employees transform learning into performance, what actions and policies are facilitating impact, and what is impeding impact.

The methods for providing this information are not limited to traditional reports, as managers are unlikely to read or heed these. Seek methods that will engage interest and participation: Use presentations, stories in newsletters, discussions at management meetings, memos, briefings, brown bag seminars, recommendations for policy and procedures changes, and inclusion of relevant findings in management training courses and seminars.

The right-hand channel in the figure represents feedback to the owners of the organization's learning architecture and processes, typically the training department. These parties need information about characteristics of learning systems and initiatives that are successful, the clarity of linkage of learning goals and processes to business goals and needs, the effectiveness of instructional designs, the effectiveness of training management processes, the perceived quality of training and performance improvement services, and so forth. Evaluation information provided to the training function should focus on cost factors, as it is the responsibility of training to ensure that learning and performance costs are continuously reduced and products and services made more efficient.

The channels converge in action that helps the organization see more business results from training. Actions include changes in managerial behavior, changes in performance systems structure (for example, measurement methods, rewards, incentives), changes in performance policies and procedures, changes in human resources initiatives, such as development planning, and other factors and processes that bear on performance improvement. Actions may also focus on the training function, such as improvements in instructional design, delivery systems, policies and procedures, needs analysis procedures, training administration, learning media, performance support tools, and so forth.

Actions based on evaluation results lead to improved organizational capability to leverage performance and business value from training, the ultimate goal of evaluation. This portion of the figure reminds us that evaluation has a clear and constructive purpose. It is not self-serving, defensive, or solely for the benefit of the training department. Like training and performance services themselves, evaluation is another tool to improve performance and business results. This also reminds us that management and the training function jointly share responsibility for this capability. Neither party alone can ensure success or take credit. The performance improvement process has learning at its heart, but learning and performance are inseparable. Learning enables performance, and performance enables learning.

Everything that learning leaders do should drive the message of the inseparability of learning and performance and support the shared ownership for the learning-performance process. Evaluation of training, when embedded in a coherent and constructive strategic framework, is a powerful tool for organizational learning and capability building. It is not only consistent with the concept of shared ownership, but it is a method for achieving and strengthening partnership. The struggle for effective partnerships of training with management is crucial for what we call high-impact learning (HIL) approaches, and for the larger success of organizations.

Success Case Evaluation

We have developed a method for performance and impact evaluation that is uniquely responsive to both the capability-building strategy explained here and to the HIL approach. This evaluation approach has been highly effective in achieving HIL results, and it has been successfully implemented dozens of times in many organizations and corporations worldwide. We call this the Success Case model (for reasons that will become apparent) and especially recommend it to help organizations build the capability they need to drive performance improvement results from learning investments.

The Success Case approach is deceptively simple and straightforward (see Figure 3). It achieves evaluation efficiencies by purposive rather than random sampling, focusing the bulk of inquiry on a relative few trainees. The underlying notion is that we can learn best from those trainees who have been exceptionally successful in applying their learning in their work, as well as from those trainees who have been the least successful. Thus, we use a two-step evaluation process.

First, we send a very brief survey to all, or a large representative sample of all trainees who participated in training. In essence, this survey asks one root question, though we may use several items to ask the question: "To what extent have you used your recent training in a way that you believe has made a significant difference to the business?" From the survey, we identify a small group of exceptionally successful and unsuccessful trainees. Each of these small core samples is then probed in depth through telephone interviews. In probing the successes, we want to document the nature and business value of their application of learning, and identify and explain the performance context factors (such as supervisory support or feedback) that enabled these few trainees to achieve the greatest possible results. With the unsuccessful trainees, we identify and understand the performance system and other obstacles that kept them from using their learning. The Success Case study produces two immediate results:

- *In-depth stories of documented business impact that can be disseminated to a variety of audiences within the company.* These stories are credible and verifiable

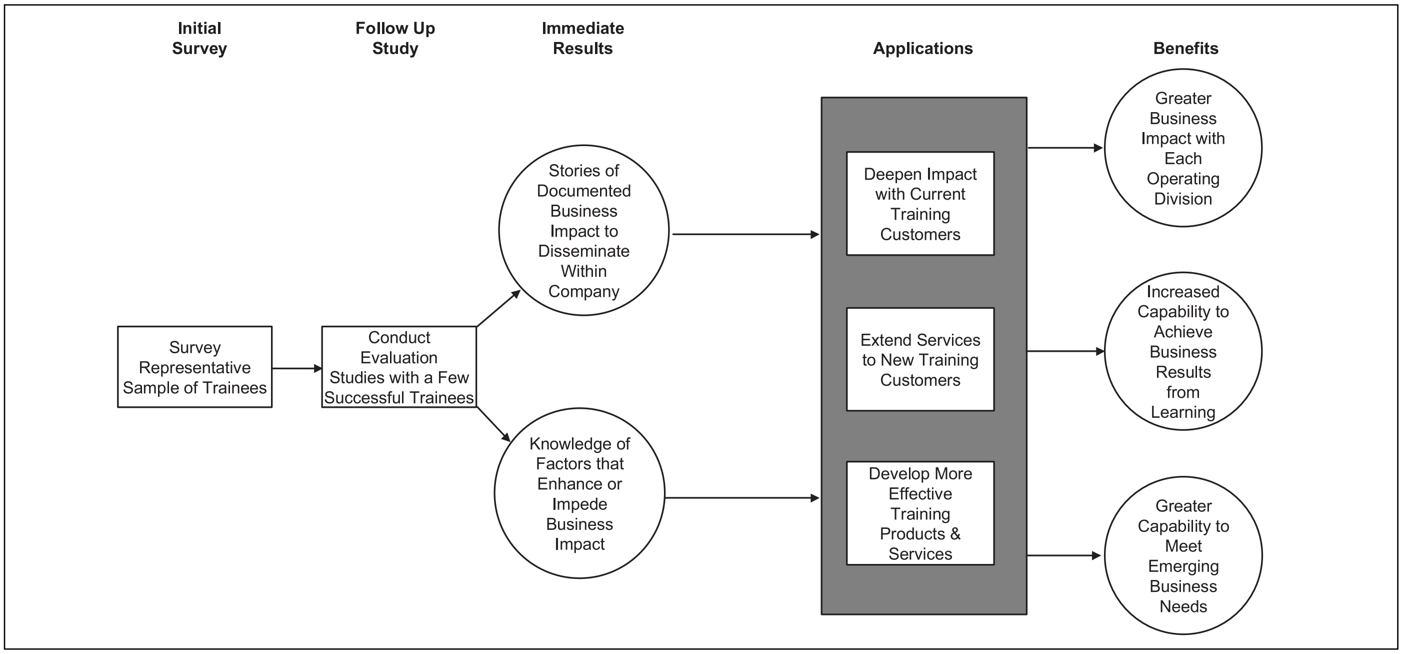

Figure 3. Success Case Approach.

and dramatically illustrate the actual business-impact results that the training is capable of producing.

- *Knowledge of factors that enhance or impede the impact of training on business results.* We identify the factors that seem to be associated with successful applications of the training, and compare and contrast these with the factors that seemed to impede training application. For example, in a recent study, we found that in nearly all successful applications, the trainees' supervisors had also participated in the training and had used particular parts of the training to reinforce application on the part of the trainees. In most of the unsuccessful cases, we found that supervisors had either not participated in the training at all or, if they had participated, did not use any parts of the training to specifically support their employees' applications.

These two results can then be used as a basis for three different applications:

- *Deepening the impact of training on business results for current customers*. The stories of business impact and knowledge of factors that affect results would be used to improve the way customers implement and support training to help achieve business impact. The primary customers for this deepening effort would be trainees and managers within business units that have completed training or that are preparing to participate in the training. Where we found, for example, that supervisory participation was a key success factor, we would make a recommendation that all supervisors participate prior to their employees' involvement.
- *Extending services to new customers*. The results of the evaluation study are a highly effective means of discussing unique customer needs and how the training might meet those needs. The stories of business impact and knowledge of factors that affect impact can be used as the basis for recruiting new customers among business units not currently using training services.
- *Creating organizational learning about training impact that builds capability*. The results of the evaluation studies would help management and learning leaders understand how they could improve both the delivery of specific courses and the overall learning architecture in the organization to achieve increasing value from training investments. The Success Case studies always suggest improvements that could be made in the training processes or materials and also in the way the training is implemented. We might add procedures into the training administration system, for example, to track the extent to which supervisors of trainees who register for training already received the training themselves. In cases where they had not, we could also include a procedure to inform them of the benefits that prior trainees have experienced, and encourage them to participate so that they could expect similar positive results when their employees engage in the training. The idea here is to leverage data about the successes and failures of the organization's training experience into lessons that the organization can use to redefine how it organizes and manages its training operations. Because these lessons are based on real and documented experience, they are perceived to be credible and actionable.

Success Case studies need not be highly formal, or even thorough, to produce valuable learning. It may not be important, for example, to extrapolate estimates of the breadth of impact achieved. In a preliminary training initiative, for instance, it may simply be helpful to use the Success Case interview method to discover some successful applications of training. These applications can then be built into the content and materials that future trainees will use, helping them more quickly apply their training by using the experience of those who were trained earlier.

Opportunities for Using the Success Case Approach

We have found a number of highly strategic opportunities to use the Success Case method.

Using Rapid Prototyping

Rapid prototyping is a strategy used to meet a quickly emerging market need, even though little may be known about that need, or not enough time is available to provide a complete solution, or both. Rapid prototyping enables a provider to meet a need quickly, before the opportunity passes, and to use the resulting market experience to shape and refine future iterations of the product.

While the term *rapid prototyping* is usually applied to the development of technical hardware and software, it applies equally well to the training arena. Using a rapid prototype approach, a training department can quickly design and provide a rough and admittedly incomplete solution by compressing the normal needs analysis and development timeline. Soon after the training is provided, a Success Case study could be conducted, using the resulting data to revise and refine the training solution. Rapid prototyping leverages discovery learning. Several cycles of design, delivery, and evaluation allow quickly changing and emerging needs to be met, but at the same time, later iterations of the training can be improved based on the real experience of previous trainees.

Supporting Pilot Tests

We have often helped clients conduct a Success Case study after a pilot test of a new training initiative. The Success Case study then helps refine and improve the training prior to a more extensive roll-out. The Success Case study is also used to determine where and how to conduct the next phase of the training, based on the knowledge of performance system factors that played a role in impact. Finally, the Success Case information can generate a list of helpful suggestions for customers of the training that they can use to get the best results the training has to offer.

Selling "Performance Consulting"

Training leaders have long recognized that performance system factors in their customer's work settings get in the way of training impact. But they have had little success in getting their training customers to allow them to work on refining and improving the performance context. Success studies provide compelling evidence of the effects of performance system factors on training impact. They also provide compelling stories of the business impact and value training is capable of achieving when it works. When combined with data about what managers are spending on training, even when they get no results, the Success Case information can be used to make powerful arguments to training customers about the sorts of changes they could make, and the benefits they would receive if they were to make them.

Marketing Training

By its very nature, the Success Case approach to evaluation yields credible and exciting stories of performance. Success Case evidence demonstrates the power of training and shows that training can achieve real and valuable business results. These stories of documented results make powerful marketing stories that show potential customers the value that they, like others, can achieve.

Summary

The Success Case method is a straightforward, powerful way to measure the impact of any performance improvement initiative. With this approach, we can identify, document, and quantify specific instances of positive performance impact as a result of our learning solution. We can also identify environmental factors that can impede performance, helping us to diagnose issues of transfer, and work to improve our solutions. When viewed in this manner, evaluation becomes a vital tool to help us improve the value of our performance solutions, not a report card that validates the worth of the training department.

NOTE: This article is adapted from Chapter 9 of *High-Impact Learning: Strategies for Leveraging Business Results From Training,* published in 2001 by Perseus Publishing.

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