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50 Years of Evaluation

By Donald Kirkpatrick

In 1959, I was asked to write an article on my research for the *Journal of the American Society of Training Directors*. I actually wrote a series of four articles, and from them, the Kirkpatrick Four Levels were born. The articles spread quickly and took on a life of their own. Trainers began to call my work the “Kirkpatrick Model” and the “Four Levels,” which were phrases I had not used myself. —Don Kirkpatrick



This year, we celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Kirkpatrick Four Levels. In the early 1950s, I was teaching supervisory development courses at the University of Wisconsin Management Institute. I decided to pursue a PhD and chose to write a practical dissertation on evaluating the programs that I was teaching.

The first objective of my dissertation research was to measure the reaction (Level 1) of the supervisors who attended the training programs. It was important that they went back to their jobs with positive comments about the program—or we would be out of business. Managers also attended our program to evaluate whether to send their supervisors.

The second objective of the dissertation was to measure the learning (Level 2) that took place during the program. We needed to know whether we were successful in increasing knowledge, improving skills, and changing attitudes—the three objectives of our programs. We used pre- and post-tests to measure improvement in knowledge and change in attitudes, and other tools to evaluate an increase in skills.

I chose these objectives because they were the two main evaluations used at the time. I completed the requirements and received my PhD in 1954. As I applied my own research to my teaching, however, I felt that something was missing. During the next five years, I conducted more research and extended my reach to changes in behavior and results (Levels 3 and 4).

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Years later, a friend told me that people were still interested in the four levels but could no longer find copies of those articles. To meet the demand, I wrote my first book, *Evaluating Training Programs: The Four Levels*, in 1993. My son Jim and I then wrote *Transferring Learning to Behavior and Implementing the Four Levels*.

The Kirkpatrick Four Levels continue to evolve with the latest book by Jim and his wife, Wendy—*Kirkpatrick Then and Now*. It introduces the Kirkpatrick Business Partnership Model, a project management process built on the Four Levels. Their second book, *Training on Trial*, is due out in January 2010. It provides 11 case studies of organizations that have successfully applied business partnership principles so readers can benefit from their experience.

I am so thankful to ASTD for helping to make the Kirkpatrick Four Levels what they are today, and for their continued support as the model evolves and grows.

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