Kirkpatrick and beyond. A comprehensive methodology for influential training evaluations

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Abstract

Background

The popular Kirkpatrick-"four levels" approach to training evaluation has a number of limitations when an evaluation is expected to systematically influence decision makers in public and private sectors. Kirkpatrick suggests to analyse four kinds of training outcomes: reactions, learning, behaviour and results. This presents an oversimplified view of training as it ignores individual and contextual influences. However, such data is essential when an evaluation's goal is to inform training developers and decision makers on how to improve a training.

Objectives

The paper will analyse the weaknesses of the Kirkpatrick approach and its shortcomings in influencing political practice. Based on this analysis, it will outline a comprehensive methodology for influential training evaluations to overcome these problems. Conduct and results of this methodology will be exemplified by a case example of an evaluation study of trainings for Six Sigma, a methodology for organizational quality improvement.

Methods

The methodology systematically includes context and process analyses in addition to outcome data in a multi method approach to training evaluation. It includes interviews, structured observations of training sessions, pre-training, post-training, and transfer surveys.

Results

As demonstrated by the case example, the methodology was not only able to determine training impacts, but also several weaknesses which served as a source for recommendations for improving the training. An entirely outcome-focused approach such as the four levels would not have been able to provide this kind of formative feedback.

Conclusion

On a general evaluation theory and policy level, the paper can serve as an example of the limitations of pure impact evaluations. In many practical contexts they will not provide the information necessary to guide improvements of a program. As demonstrated by the suggested methodology for training evaluation, inclusion of context and process data is often indispensable for evaluation to sustainably influence practices and policies.

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