Evaluation: Do You Have a Strategy?

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Most organizations have a training strategy. It provides a broad approach to meeting knowledge and skills needs for the organization. What about your evaluation? Do you have a strategy for that? What is an evaluation strategy anyway? Chances are you've never seen one, much less employed one.

	Five Frank Questions About Your Evaluation Program		
1.	Are you still using a 10-question smile sheet?	Yes	No
2.	Does your evaluation stop at Level 2?	Yes	No
3.	Does most of your performance data disappear into a black hole?	Yes	No
4.	Does trying to calculate ROI give you sleepless nights?	Yes	No
5.	Does your evaluation output fail to have high-level impact?	Yes	No

If you cannot answer "no" to all of these questions, you should be creating a Learning Evaluation Strategy (LES) *now* because chances are you're wasting a lot of time and money and misdirecting your training resources. If nothing else, having an LES means that all of your people work from the same set of policies, procedures, and jobs aids in creating evaluation. That alone will produce enormous savings—but that is not the only benefit.

If your evaluation feels ad hoc and often pointless, chances are it is *not* driven by a strategy. This is bad news for training professionals pressed to demonstrate value to the organization. The good news is that creating a sound strategy for evaluation guarantees you will produce useful, actionable, and meaningful data around which you can build your entire training program.

> A good evaluation strategy sets up your entire training evaluation structure.
> It creates the contents for you, establishes consistency, and helps replace distrust with confidence in you and the outcomes your report.
> It is well worth doing.

What is a Strategy?
A *strategy* is developed from a high vantage point. It is the overarching description of an initiative, its goals, and the approach for attaining them.

A good evaluation strategy drives the creation of your policy, plans, and procedures, freeing you from re-working your approaches with every intervention. Every future evaluative effort is derived from this strategy.

**In learning evaluation, a strategy constructs a means
for relating measured changes in performance based on training
back to organizational goals.
It closes the loop between monies allocated to training
and impact on organizational performance.**

What is Not a Strategy

Let's review some of the best-known evaluation practices to determine what is not a strategy but perhaps a framework, policy, or tool instead. For instance, Kirkpatrick's Four Levels is a *framework* for categorizing evaluation (an ontology)—not a strategy. It helps you classify the types of measurement appropriate to different stages of learning. It does not prescribe how to approach this or any other evaluation, meaning you will have to specify the approach each time—the opposite of a strategy.

A *policy* defines the rules and standards that apply to any activity. Relying on policy—if policy is not based on a strategy—can delude you into tilting at evaluative "windmills" rather than following a cohesive approach to measuring impact. The policy of gathering smile sheets, for example, without knowing how you are going to interpret and apply the information, gets you nowhere and diminishes the credibility of your evaluative efforts.

Similarly, using *tools* instead of following a strategy can give unhelpful results. For example, calculating ROI to justify your training can be as dangerous as driving while looking in the rear view mirror—it can easily distract you from seeing what is really important: where you're going. Evaluation should direct your forward motion rather than nit-pick the past. It should stimulate and support an open, constructive debate on how to improve the quality of operations—and that's not just training operations but any of your performance-improvement initiatives.

All of these concepts can serve a purpose but without a strategy they are only band-aids instead of a cure for training and performance problems.

**A good evaluation strategy focuses, directs,
and compels your training energies.**

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Strategy is the Key to Good Evaluation Yields
Depending on how much needs to be assembled, reviewed, and developed, a learning evaluation strategy can be written over several months or even weeks. It elevates the standard of training practice to the same level of professional rigor as is expected elsewhere in the organization. This powerful advancement demonstrates the worth of training interventions and proves training's value to the organization. Using an LES culminates in outcomes reports that position the training manager to deliver actionable, timely, and on-target recommendations for improving organizational performance every time it is employed. Creating an LES this year means you can produce compelling outcomes for decision making next year, enhancing your reputation and your department's clout.

Developing a LES May Be the Smartest Move You Make This Year

Creating Your Own Learning Evaluation Strategy

To build a good evaluation strategy, begin with your organization's most recent environmental scan or SWOT analysis. If you need to do a new one, here's a shopping list of potential input to consider (see sidebar). When you have a reasonably accurate one, review it from an evaluative perspective. (This is important because evaluation is not often seen as part of the developmental process but rather something that is added at the end of the cycle—the opposite of what should be true.)

Mining Data from Existing Documents	
An example of what to be looking for using the SWOT method is:	
Strength	We have a central database to house all online evaluations
Weakness	Level 1 evaluations *never* make it back to the ISD person
Opportunity	Our customers might be able to tell us more about the impact of our customer service training
Threat	We are incapable of answering ROI questions from the Finance Department

Based on our project experience, we recommend the following guidelines for helping an organization develop an LES. Understanding these steps helps you define who should be on the LES Team.

Steps for Developing a Learning Evaluation Strategy
Here are the 10 steps we follow in crafting an LES that will take your training organization to a higher echelon of performance.

Developing a Learning Evaluation Strategy

What You Need to Begin: Inputs to the Process

Gathering as many of these data-rich documents as possible is your first data mining effort.

- Statements of the overall organization's mission, strategy, and goals (all kinds of goals: scientific, financial, image, customer satisfaction, employee satisfaction, growth, etc.)

- Statements of the training department's (or performance improvement department's) mission, strategy, and goals

- Results of a customer study that identifies what factors are important to customer satisfaction

- Results of an employee competency study that determines what employees should be doing

- Any legal and/or regulatory requirements

Breaking down these documents into their elements will give you important building blocks for compiling your new strategy.

Step 1: Know Your Limits. Your first evaluation strategy is often the hardest to create. We recommend hiring a consultant if you haven't done this before. This is especially true when you are moving away from any legacy system. Having an outside perspective when structural change coincides with strategy creation can be enormously helpful.

Step 2: Convene a Task Force. Your team should include stakeholder representatives for groups that need to give buy-in. [See sidebars suggestions for composition of the task force.]

Step 3: Look Around for Best Practices. Where possible, look at other organizations' evaluation strategy documents, and interview them to identify best practices and pitfalls. Be sure to identify cultural values and norms that may help/hinder the effort (do force field analysis).

Step 4: Map the Process. Have your team identify, map out, and critique the current processes that learning evaluation uses.

Step 5: Conduct a SWOT Analysis. Your team will examine your current evaluation environment, practice, and process. From your SWOT analysis, specify strategic priorities, goals, potential obstacles, and immovable constraints.

Step 6: Develop Your Strategy. From the output of your SWOT analysis, you can broadly identify alternative strategic approaches. These should address priorities, overcome obstacles, work within constraints, and achieve goals. Establish how you will know whether you have succeeded or not (evaluation measures). Select those strategies that best fit your resources and culture.

Step 7: Document Your Strategy. Be sure to cover your environment scan; values; vision and mission for the evaluation service; priorities; goals; and evaluation strategies. You may need to address the different needs of logical subdivisions (e.g. for each Strategic Business Unit, or for each major competency area).

Step 8: Gain Stakeholder Buy-in. Review the draft LES document with all stakeholder groups, solicit their comments, and then make revisions. Have all stakeholders sign off on the final version. Have a formal "sign-off" page for key decision makers, and consider holding a ceremony to demonstrate their support for the project.

Step 9: Create Your Policy, Plan, and Procedures. Develop the policies (standards, practices, and authorities), plan or timeline for implementing them, and optimal procedures and instruments by which to carry them out.

Step 10: Roll-Out. If policies and procedures are a radical departure from current practice, or require resources that are not yet in place, also develop a phase-in plan over several years. Prepare a pitch that "sells" the new concepts and procedures, particularly for those who have not been directly involved in their creation. Be sure to include means of measuring your success.

The LES Team	
Core Project Team	Evaluation Project Manager Consultants/SMEs ISD Manager (or Representative) Key Line Managers
Champions	Head of Training His or Her Boss (Preferably a Senior VP, VP or CLO)
Advisors	Human Resources, IT, Market Research, Legal

Assembling Your LES Team

As you can see from the steps above, this is not a one person task. Addressing the needs and concerns of a variety of stakeholders are integral to the creation and rollout of the successful LES, so it will be helpful to

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have them or their representatives on your team. Not only is key stakeholder participation essential to having their interests considered, you cannot expect their support if they have not been involved throughout the LES's creation.

Designating an Evaluation Project Manager
The prerequisites for Evaluation Project Manager include formal education in ISD and basic research techniques. (Their levels of education and comfort with evaluation will determine how much they need to turn to consultants.) Next in importance is a good understanding of where data exists in the organization and how to get it. They should also be up-front communicators with the ability to reach out, create buy-in, and build a team. Add a strong sense of logic, conceptual objectivity (the ability to step back from the details and assess the workability of a given construct or intervention), and the genuine desire to improve how the organization works, and you have a good candidate for Evaluation Project Manager.

What are the Benefits of a LES?
Forging a Learning Evaluation Strategy will produce specific interventions that link directly to meeting business goals. These will increase performance and profitability or production.
For instance, creating your LES requires working hard to discover what evaluation problems exist, but this in turn leads to finding

Actionability vs. Criticism
Performance Improvement
Rather than Finger Pointing

their solutions. The process helps you uncover the gaps, the opportunities, the overlaps, and the redundancies in your current evaluation regimen. Once identified, you can both dramatically increase the usefulness of your evaluation and drastically cut the costs involved in conducting it.

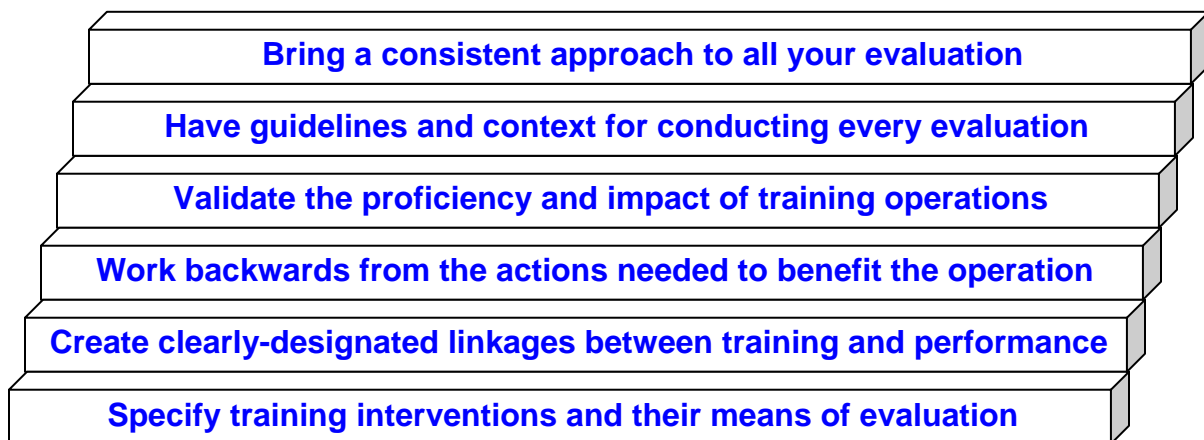| BY USING A GOOD LEARNING EVALUATION STRATEGY	
You will:	**You will NOT:**
• Evaluate *only* the aspects of training that help determine their impact on the business	• Collect data that won't be used
• Strive for unobtrusive, cost-effective, targeted data collection	• Re-invent the evaluation "wheel" every time
• Conduct highly-effective, pragmatic evaluation that is taken seriously	• Waste time, money and resources

Here is the real point of demarcation from legacy evaluation efforts: your focus is forward on improving future performance rather than backwards on measuring past performance. Because your focus is on the *actionability* of your evaluation, your perspective is wider, your actions more targeted, and your outcomes more valuable, too. Rather than limit your examination to a single course or curriculum, the LES takes in the *entire* organizational training effort.

> The greater breadth and depth of data collection under a LES yields greater prospects for training solutions than just course by course fixes.
> Better yet, it delivers them with
> unprecedented cost efficiency and effectiveness.

With the greater horizon, though, comes the necessity to be creative about your data gathering approaches. (This is where an experienced consultant can really make a difference.) While challenging to construct, the result is highly-effective enterprise-wide training improvements built from data collected from the entirety of the training program as opposed to traditional, token, and largely useless course-centric data.

Summary

The primary benefit of a Learning Evaluation Strategy is that it provides an overview of all of your training activities and the organization's required business impact—the beginning and the end of the training continuum.

Bring a consistent approach to all your evaluation

Have guidelines and context for conducting every evaluation

Validate the proficiency and impact of training operations

Work backwards from the actions needed to benefit the operation

Create clearly-designated linkages between training and performance

Specify training interventions and their means of evaluation

Your evaluation strategy gives rise to the best linkages between training and results with each application. It clarifies the interventions that you need and identifies those that are totally irrelevant. This informs your policies, practices, and procedures. It impacts all of your business outcomes.

From the LES, you can plot the specific evaluative interventions you need in order to streamline the entire process without wasting time measuring what doesn't need to be measured. Developing a good Learning Evaluation Strategy makes you look good as it helps your organization work smarter.

This is Truly a Case of Where LES is... More!

What to Look for in a Consultant

In reviewing the 10 Steps to Developing an LES, be frank about where you might need help. That is the beginning of your list of qualifications in seeking a consultant. Essential areas of expertise should include:

- *Strategic Business Thinking* – the ability to frame the strategy in a context that makes sense to the organization and its objectives; linking training back to business goals
- *Market Research* – practical knowledge of research design, sampling, managing focus groups, and data analysis
- *Instructional Design* - understand the training process and its objectives
- *Learning Technologies and Tools* - know what works to collect data as painlessly, unobtrusively, and inexpensively as possible
- *Data Mining* - being able to make sense out of the available information already existing within your organization
- *Interpretation and Communication Skills* - ability to make sense out of the data, reach conclusions, offer recommendations, and present it so that stakeholders get the key information they need to make good management decisions
- *Project Management and Mentoring* – first time LES development will proceed more effectively if headed by an experienced strategist. If an LES is new to you or your organization, consider having a consultant or an experienced project manager take the lead. Even better, engage someone who can lead the project and develop the competencies of the evaluation manager.

Want to Know "More about LES"?

For more information on developing your own
Learning Evaluation Strategy (LES),
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