

# Four Steps for Evaluating Recognition Programs

The same principles used for measuring the impact of training can be applied to recognition programs.

By Bob Nelson and Patrick Dailey

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**A**n old management maxim says, "If you can't measure it, you can't manage it."

Recognition is no exception. Justifying the time, effort and, most importantly, the expense of any recognition program means demonstrating its impact. This requires you to determine a baseline and to show improvement in that baseline.

The art of recognition has been with us since the beginning of time. The science of recognition is a recent development that has begun to influence the design and delivery of recognition programs. An area that has received little attention is the systematic approach to evaluating the impact of recognition programs.

Recognition programs usually are designed to meet the multiple objectives of performance and administration ease, but they often fall short of the ultimate objective: Does the program work? This article examines a multiple-level system of evaluating recognition programs that derives from Donald Kirkpatrick's model for evaluating the impact of training (*Evaluating Training Programs: The Four Levels*, Berrett-Koehler, 1994). First introduced in 1959, Kirkpatrick's model still serves as an industry standard for evaluating training results. Extensive research and application of the model indicate there are four basic levels in measuring the impact of training:

Level 1: Reaction-Did the participants like the training?

Level 2: Learning-Did the participants learn something in the training?

Level 3: Behavior-Did the participants apply what they learned in the training back on the job?

Level 4: Results-Did the participants' application on the job impact the organization?

If you compare the impact of training programs, regardless of the content, to the impact of recognition programs, many similarities exist in how the programs are measured. A modification of Kirkpatrick's model results in a method that can be used to measure the impact of recognition programs. Here's an examination of the similarities between measuring training and recognition.

## **Level 1: Reaction**

Reaction is commonly obtained at the end of a seminar or workshop by simply asking the participants, "How did the training feel to you?" Usually designed as a questionnaire, trainers refer to this level as "happy sheets" or a "feel-good measure." Such measurement shouldn't be underestimated. Participants' reactions can help you determine the effectiveness of a program and how it can be improved. Kirkpatrick believes you can't bypass the first level because, as he puts it, "If [participants] do not react favorably, they will not be motivated to learn." If participants aren't enjoying the program, you'll have an increasingly difficult time keeping them engaged in the activity.

Applying Level 1 evaluation to recognition programs affords the evaluator the easiest, and probably the most common, measure of recognition. A systematic approach to participants' reaction to the program could include simple questions such as:

- Is your work group excited about the recognition program?
- Did the program describe how and why you should recognize others?
- Are the program guidelines clear and communicated well?
- Is the nomination and award process simple to use?
- Do you like the merchandise or activities provided as re-wards for the program?
- How is it better than the previous program or activity?
- What is your favorite part of the program?
- Are there areas for improvement?

You can also use various formats such as short answers, complete-the-sentence, ratings, or collect data via focus groups. If you don't measure anything else about your program, you should find out how employees feel about it. Positive reactions to the program can provide information for continued support and enable you to leverage the success of the program.

### **Level 2: Learning**

Evaluation of whether the participants understand how and why they should use the program requires additional effort.

Kirkpatrick defines learning as the "extent to which participants change attitudes, improve knowledge and/or increase skill as a result of attending the program." It's typically easier to determine what new knowledge or skills participants have acquired than the ways in which the training changed their opinions or beliefs. Tests are the most frequent method of evaluating learning.

As it applies to recognition, you can measure if certain skills or awareness levels have changed since the roll-out of the program. Participants can be asked (pre- and post-event) how important it is to recognize employees, how often they should do so, in what types of situations and in what ways. Training can teach guidelines for effective praising and provide opportunities to practice the skill. Other measurable recognition skills include:

- Using formal, informal and day-to-day recognition
- Knowing how to praise publicly
- Timing the recognition appropriately
- Writing a persuasive nomination for an employee award
- Knowing what forms of recognition work well for different types of performance.

Effective evaluation of a recognition training program should let you determine if the participants understand how to use the program and why they should recognize others.

### **Level 3: Behavior**

Even if you can show learning has occurred, it doesn't guarantee that learning translates to new behavior back on the job. The third level of training helps assess impact of employee learning back on the job. This form of evaluation can be time consuming and costly, but it's critical in determining if classroom knowledge transfers to the workplace.

Evaluating behavior change from the implementation of a recognition program offers several opportunities for determining follow-up interviews and surveys of participants as well as their co-workers. Evaluation of behavior is somewhat easier if the measurement is established as part of the program—for example, a tracking report or checklist—not an activity to be done independently of the program.

The most effective strategy for evaluating participants' behavior change from a recognition program is to build the measurement system directly into the program. Tracking systems, either centralized or at the department level, enable evaluators to determine if the program is being used. Simple forms of behavior change from introducing recognition programs include:

- How frequently do managers recognize their employees?
- How many employees receive written praise from managers, peers or customers?
- Are recognition tools being used more often?
- Are program guidelines adhered to accurately?
- Is an appropriate level of recognition given for the behavior?
- How often and to what extent is recognition a part of the organization's communication vehicles?

The data can be useful in examining variations over time by manager or department, by level in the organization or by facility, by comparisons of corporate offices versus field operations, by comparisons among different regions and so on.

You can buy software from several companies to help you automate these tracking requirements. These programs also help keep recognition fresh and in front of the managers, thus making sure they transfer what they learned back to the job.

#### **Level 4: Results**

Even if you've measured the first three levels of a recognition program, you still don't know what impact the program has on the organization. The fourth level of training evaluation focuses on the impact the behaviors have on performance.

This measurement is the most critical in evaluating training, but the least pursued. Measuring results is both difficult and time consuming. It was originally interpreted as direct real dollars earned or saved as a consequence of the training.

Measurement of results has broadened to include indirect benefits such as opportunity cost savings, increase in performance capacity, customer satisfaction, improved safety, and decreased turnover. By including these measures, those who evaluate training have been able to examine many opportunities and take credit for significantly more dollars earned or saved.

The results of a recognition program can include both direct and indirect measures of impact. Many recognition programs already include productivity award programs based directly on increased performance, capacity or improvement in production goals. Sales incentive programs can help increase sales revenue and employee suggestion programs often tie rewards directly to a percentage of dollars earned or saved. Indirect measures can focus specifically on the behavior or performance the recognition is designed to reinforce. Then programs could be evaluated for the intent of their design. For example:

- Customer service awards that improve attention and care given to the customer

- Team awards that enhance cooperation
- Safety programs that reduce on-the-job injuries
- Quality award systems that enhance product quality.

Even when the reward program's focus is simply to increase the morale of the organization, measures can be built to examine the results of the program's effectiveness. In this instance, employee surveys or exit interviews can include questions that evaluate the level of recognition or indicate the program's effectiveness. For example, when morale is low, employees typically rank one or more of the following survey items very low:

- My manager recognizes me when I do good work.
- My manager makes time for me when I need to talk.
- I feel appreciated for the work I do.
- I feel I am a valuable member of the team or department.

Surveying employees' attitudes help determine whether their perceptions of the company are improving. Surveys also help quantify morale at the individual, group and organizational level.

The more that recognition activities and programs are geared toward driving significant organizational performance and strategic results, the easier it is to justify funds to support the programs. We all want to have recognition programs that are liked, easy to learn and readily applied back on the job.

The challenge for sustaining and improving recognition initiatives is how to evaluate the program's organizational impact. To do this, reverse the evaluation strategy and begin with the end in mind. Define the results first to be sure the program can achieve them. Start with a clear idea of your goals, and the performance you want will strengthen the link of recognition to results.

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