

**The Kirkpatrick Four Levels:  
A Fresh Look After 50 Years  
1959 - 2009**

*By Jim Kirkpatrick, PhD  
and Wendy Kayser Kirkpatrick*

April 2009

## A Golden Anniversary Celebration

The Kirkpatrick Four Levels are turning 50 this year! November 1959 marked the first time Don Kirkpatrick published his thoughts on training evaluation with a series of four articles in the *Journal of the ASTD*. Don will tell you he did not call them levels, and he did not coin the phrase Kirkpatrick Four Level Evaluation Model. He did, however, use the legendary four words that comprise the foremost training evaluation model today: Reaction, Learning, Behavior, and Results.

On the anniversary of the four levels, we thought it would be appropriate to first honor Don and his work, and second to share with you how the four levels have both evolved and remained relevant over the last half century.

## The Day of Reckoning Has Arrived

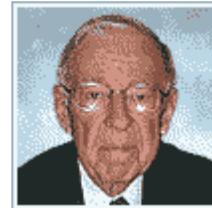
When we conduct workshops on the Kirkpatrick Model all over the world, we find a surprising number of misconceptions about it. After 50 years, we figured it was time to set the record straight. Rather than attempt to clarify the many misunderstandings about the four levels, we will focus on the salient elements of the model, and show you how to leverage its power at a time when the day of reckoning has arrived for the entire learning industry.

Don's incredible vision is evident in a quote he obtained from a colleague back in 1959:

"Managers, needless to say, expect their manufacturing and sales departments to yield a good return and will go to great lengths to find out whether they have done so... likewise, training directors might be well advised to take the initiative and evaluate their programs *before the day of reckoning arrives.*"

*"The Experimental Evaluation of Management Training: Principles and Practice,"* Daniel M. Goodacre III, The B.F. Goodrich Company, *Personnel*, May 1957

This statement represents what the ultimate intent of the four levels of evaluation was then, and is today: to show the business value and worth of training.



Donald L. Kirkpatrick, PhD

The ultimate intent of the Kirkpatrick Four Levels was then, and is today:

To show the business value and worth of training.

# The Kirkpatrick Four Levels: A Fresh Look After 50 Years

Before unveiling our new Kirkpatrick Model visual, we will present what we consider to be the five foundational principles. The following are the cornerstones of this model as a differentiator from others, and the keys to successful implementation of training programs. Some will likely be a surprise to you.

## Five Foundational Principles

### 1. The end is the beginning

Most learning professionals have heard of the four levels, and many can recite them. But relatively few know how to effectively get beyond Level 2. When presenting these concepts to groups of professionals, we often refer to current evaluation practice as “smile sheets (L1), pre and posttests (L2), and hope for the best (L3 and L4).” Most of our workshop participants know exactly what we are saying.

In 1993, Don wrote his first book on the Four Levels to explain the entire model (which is, and has always been, more comprehensive than four simple levels). On page 26 of *Evaluating Training Programs: The Four Levels* (1<sup>st</sup> Edition, Berrett-Koehler, 1993), Don writes:

“Trainers must begin with desired results and then determine what behavior is needed to accomplish them. Then trainers must determine the attitudes, knowledge, and skills that are necessary to bring about the desired behavior(s). The final challenge is to present the training program in a way that enables the participants not only to learn what they need to know but also to react favorably to the program.”

It is unfortunate that the message above has been missed by many learning professionals. For decades, practitioners have attempted to apply the four levels *after* a program has been developed and delivered. It is difficult, if not impossible, to create significant training value that way.

All this is said to distinguish the development of the *plan* to build effective programs and evaluation methodology (which starts with Results, as shown to the right) from the actual *data collection*, which *does* begin with Level 1 and works forward through Level 4.

## Kirkpatrick Four Levels

<b>Level 4: Results</b>	To what degree targeted outcomes occur, as a result of the learning event(s) and subsequent reinforcement.
<b>Level 3: Behavior</b>	To what degree participants apply what they learned during training when they are back on the job.
<b>Level 2: Learning</b>	To what degree participants acquire the intended knowledge, skills, and attitudes based on their participation in the learning event.
<b>Level 1: Reaction</b>	To what degree participants react favorably to the learning event.

## The Kirkpatrick Four Levels: A Fresh Look After 50 Years

### 2. **Return on Expectations (ROE) is the ultimate indicator of value**

What normally happens when executives ask for new training? Despite what they might say, most learning professionals jump to the task by all-too-quickly retreating to their departments and commencing to design and develop suitable programs. While a cursory needs assessment may be conducted, it is rarely taken to the point that expectations of the training contribution are completely clear.

Much of the training and consulting that the Kirkpatricks do involves helping learning professionals *negotiate* key business stakeholder expectations. This is a process where learning professionals ask questions to clarify and refine the expectations of the key business stakeholder so that they are satisfying to the latter and realistically achievable to the former. Learning professionals then need to convert those rather generic expectations into observable, measurable success outcomes by asking the question, "What will success look like to you?" Those success indicators then become the Level 4 outcomes – the targets – to which you can sharply focus your collective efforts to accomplish return on stakeholder expectations.

### 3. **Business partnership is necessary to bring about positive ROE**

Note in the last sentence, we wrote, "collective efforts." Contrary to training myth and deep tradition, we do not believe that training events *in and of themselves* deliver positive, bottom line outcomes. Much has to happen *before* and *after* formal training. Learning professionals need help to do it, and that help needs to come from our business partners. Historically, the comfort zone of learning professionals has been Levels 1 and 2. We believe this is one of the major reasons why many learning professionals spend almost all of their time there. But the actual *execution* of learning programs and overall corporate strategy occurs primarily at Level 3.

2008 research by Bersin and Associates shows us that as much as 70% of employee learning occurs *on-the-job* in many different ways. Thus, we need to *reinvent* our roles by becoming experts in and deeply involved with learning that extends *beyond* our normal comfort level, or we run the risk of losing our positions.

Therefore, not only do we need to call upon our business partners to help us identify what success will look like, but we will need a cooperative effort throughout the learning and performance processes.

Before training, learning professionals need to partner with supervisors and managers to prepare participants for training. Supervisors should explain to their direct reports what they will learn in training, why it's important, expectations for actions during and after the training event, and the kind of support they will receive throughout the process.

**Return On Expectations (ROE):**  
Focusing training and reinforcement efforts on the stated bottom-line expectations of business partners, with the goal of delivering the key outcomes / results they expect.

### Where Learning Takes Place



Josh Bersin and Associates, 2008

## The Kirkpatrick Four Levels: A Fresh Look After 50 Years

Even more critical is the role of the supervisor or manager after the training. They are the key people to reinforce newly learned knowledge and skills through support and accountability. The degree to which this reinforcement and coaching happens directly correlates to improved performance and positive outcomes.

It is often said that a picture is worth a thousand words. To the right is one of our signature pictures that we believe accurately illustrates the concept of business partnership – with the business on the left, training on the right, and the bridge as our way of crossing over.

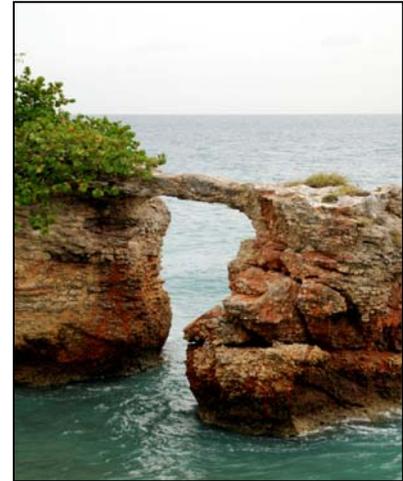
This is no easy sell to many executives and managers, because we have all been in cahoots to perpetuate the myth that good training leads to positive results on its own. Going forward, we must make a business case to our key stakeholders that we need them to work with us at different points along the learning and performance continuum. Business partnership, not the delivery of training programs, is the secret to positive outcomes.

#### 4. Value must be created before it can be demonstrated

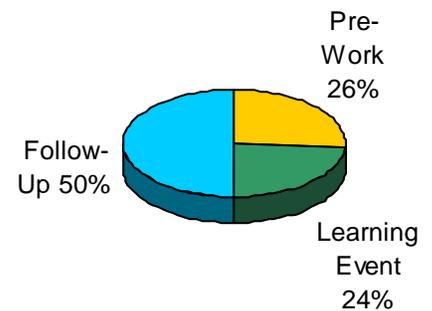
A colleague of ours, Sandy Almeida, MD, MPH, recently sent us a summary of her research that identified statistical correlations between the four levels. There is good correlation between Levels 1 and 2, in that positive learner engagement led to a higher degree of learning. Similarly, the correlation between Levels 3 and 4 was significant – if employees consistently perform critical on-the-job behaviors, individual and overall productivity increased. There was *not*, however, a significant correlation between Levels 2 and 3. In short, Sandy states that even providing excellent training does *not* lead to significant transfer of learning to behavior and subsequent results without a good deal of deliberate and consistent reinforcement.

Consider those findings in combination with a study conducted by Dr. Brent Peterson at Columbia University in 2004. He compared the amount of time that is spent developing training and related activities, and what actually contributes to learning effectiveness. He found that the typical organization invests 85% of its resources in the training event, yet those events only contributed 24% to the learning effectiveness of the participants. The activities that led to the most learning effectiveness were follow-up activities that occurred after the training event.

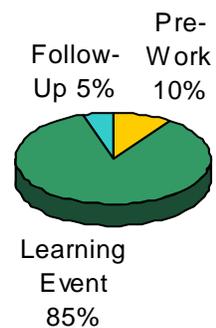
What does this mean? That we are putting *most* of our time into designing, developing and delivering training (L1 and L2) and only getting about one-quarter of the benefit. And we are spending virtually *none* of our time on the follow-up activities that translate into positive behavior change and subsequent results (L3 and L4) that we intend our training programs to deliver.



#### Activities Contributing to Learning Effectiveness



#### Typical Learning Investment



Dr. Brent Peterson,  
Columbia University, 2004

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That is one of the biggest reasons why a comprehensive ASTD study in 2006 identified the fact that more than 70% of training failure comes *after* training is completed. The major factors were that employees didn't get a chance to apply what they learned soon enough, and an ineffective culture of follow-up and coaching existed. Bottom line? It is essential that learning professionals *redefine* their roles and extend their expertise, their involvement, their influence, their impact, and their value into Levels 3 and 4 *before the day of reckoning arrives.*

### 5. A compelling *chain of evidence* demonstrates your bottom line value

What do we mean by "corporate jury"? We believe that each of us – individuals, departments, our entire industry – is on trial, accused of "not bringing enough value to the bottom line to justify our costs." And in all cases, there is either an individual or group of business leaders who are sitting in judgment of our performance and our impact to the business.

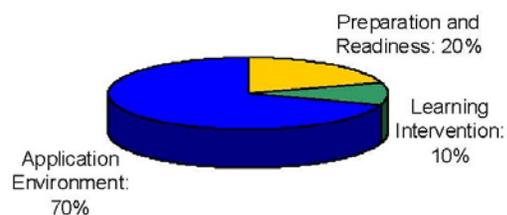
Our friend and colleague, Nick DeNardo from Edward Jones, refers to data collected at Levels 1 and 2 as "consumptive metrics" and data at Levels 3 and 4 as "impact metrics." If we are only providing our jury members with numbers of programs and attendees (L1 and L2 data) we are basically shouting, "Look how much this is costing you!" and, thus, have a bulls eye painted on our backs. If, on the other hand, we work our way backwards from Level 4 and include L3 and L4 metrics, particularly for mission critical programs, we are saying just as loudly, "Look how much value we are bringing."

A chain of evidence consists of data and information that sequentially connects the four levels and shows the contribution learning has made to the business. We recently wrote a book entitled *Training On Trial* (AMACOM, 2009) that details these and other principles of what we call the *Kirkpatrick Business Partnership Model*. We talk about how we do *not* believe in attempting to isolate the impact of training in order to prove our value. Instead, we advocate presenting a chain of evidence that illustrates the value of the *entire business partnership effort*.

### The "New" Kirkpatrick Model

It is now time to pull the wraps off not only the *true* Kirkpatrick model, but also the *complete* model. While it contains the same ideas that Don (and we) have been communicating over the last 50 years, we felt a more complete illustration of the model would help both learning professionals and their business partners to create more training value together.

Causes of "Training Failure"



2006 ASTD Study

#### Consumptive metrics:

Level 1 and Level 2 data indicating how much time and how many resources have been invested in training

#### Impact metrics:

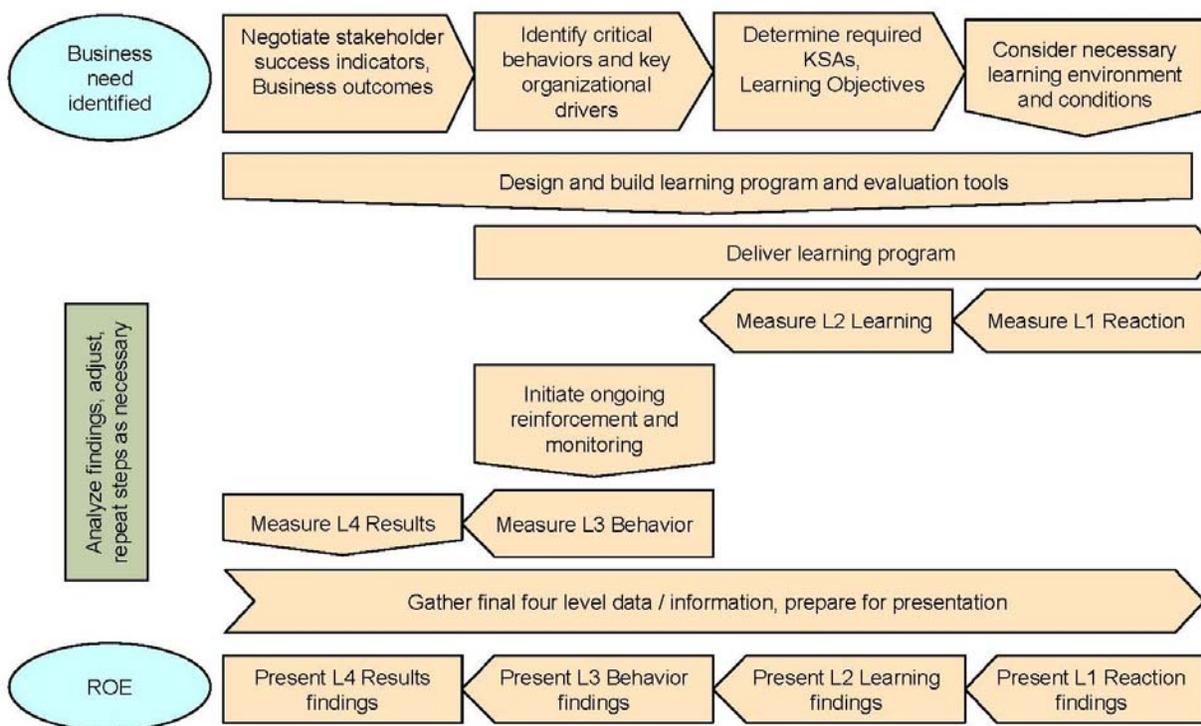
Level 3 and Level 4 data indicating the value and tangible results that training has delivered

# The Kirkpatrick Four Levels: A Fresh Look After 50 Years

## Training Needs Analysis: The End is the Beginning

Start in the upper left corner of the model. Note that it starts with a formal connection between the business and learning, whereby a request is made to work toward resolving a business problem, or taking advantage of a market opportunity. As mentioned already, the end is the beginning because you are working from L4 to L1 in the first four steps. You will determine what success will look like (L4), and then subsequent critical behaviors and organizational drivers (L3). We identify “critical behaviors” as the few, targeted behaviors that program graduates must apply back at their jobs in order to bring about the identified outcomes. “Organizational drivers”, on the other hand, are the actions and processes that are carried out by others (e.g., coaches, mentors, peers, software programs, etc.) that are designed and implemented to reinforce the participants to perform their critical behaviors.

### The Kirkpatrick Model



Next, we deal with the required KSAs – or competencies – needed for participants to be able to perform their new on-the-job behaviors (L2). Finally, we subsequently address the learning environment and conditions that will support learning effectiveness and enjoyment (L1). We define “environment” as the venue and modality for training, and “conditions” as prerequisites for ultimate success (i.e., corporate culture, participant readiness, etc.).

Once the four levels have been dealt with from a planning perspective, it is time to get your instructional designers working on the actual program or programs that have been identified as necessary to bring about the targeted outcomes. Importantly (and often forgotten), this is also the time to determine the best way to measure each of the four levels, and build the tools and measurement plan you will use. Next comes the delivery of the program(s), in whatever modality and venue you selected earlier. This is also when formal evaluating begins with Level 1 and Level 2. This is probably familiar territory for most learning professionals.

## Entering “New Territory” For Many Learning Professionals

The diagram (now moving back from right to left) starts to move into new territory for many learning professionals at this point. The next step is called “initiate ongoing reinforcement and monitoring.” This has everything to do with what happens *after* learning events, and deals with what we talked about under the principle of creating value. It is true that what gets measured, gets done, and the best suggestion we have here is to monitor and measure the critical behaviors (L3), the organizational drivers, and preliminary outcomes (L4). Use the data to make sure that behaviors and drivers are meeting standards to ensure positive outcomes, and provide your stakeholders – jury members – with a periodic dashboard to show them initiative progress.

During this step is also the time to partner with managers and supervisors who are responsible for ongoing coaching and reinforcement. Offer any assistance you can and follow up with them frequently. While this step in the process looks like one small box, it actually represents months or even years of effort. This is where you will see 50% of learning effectiveness occur. It’s where you can prevent 70% of the potential learning failures if done properly. In short, we believe “ongoing reinforcement and monitoring” is among the most critical steps in the entire model!

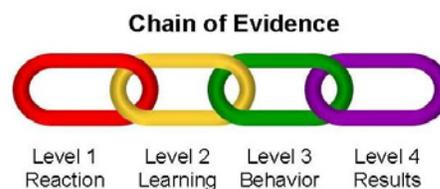
The gray box on the left side of the diagram is a reminder to analyze your findings along the way, and make positive adjustments where you can to eliminate snags at Levels 1, 2, or 3. If you determine that conditions are limiting the ability of associates to learn or apply the information, now is the time to call attention to this and create a backup plan. There is no value in going through the entire process to find out at the end that intended results aren’t achieved because of something that could have been corrected months earlier!

## Building Your Chain of Evidence

When you are satisfied with your preliminary findings at each of the levels, it’s time to prepare final data and testimonials that will make up your “closing argument” to the jury. Presentation of your chain of evidence goes from right to left, starting with Level 1 and moving step by step to create your value story through Level 4, Results. Ultimately (and hopefully) this value-filled and evidence-based story will lead to a positive verdict: one where your stakeholders say that beyond a reasonable doubt, the overall learning initiative has successfully contributed to the intended results. For mission critical cases (programs), be sure to practice how you will make your oral presentation to your jury. It is always sad for us to see training departments that do great work fall short of impressing their stakeholders because they didn’t make an effective and compelling presentation.

### Ongoing reinforcement and monitoring

- May reflect months or years of effort
- 50% of learning effectiveness occurs here
- 70% of potential learning failures occur here if not done properly

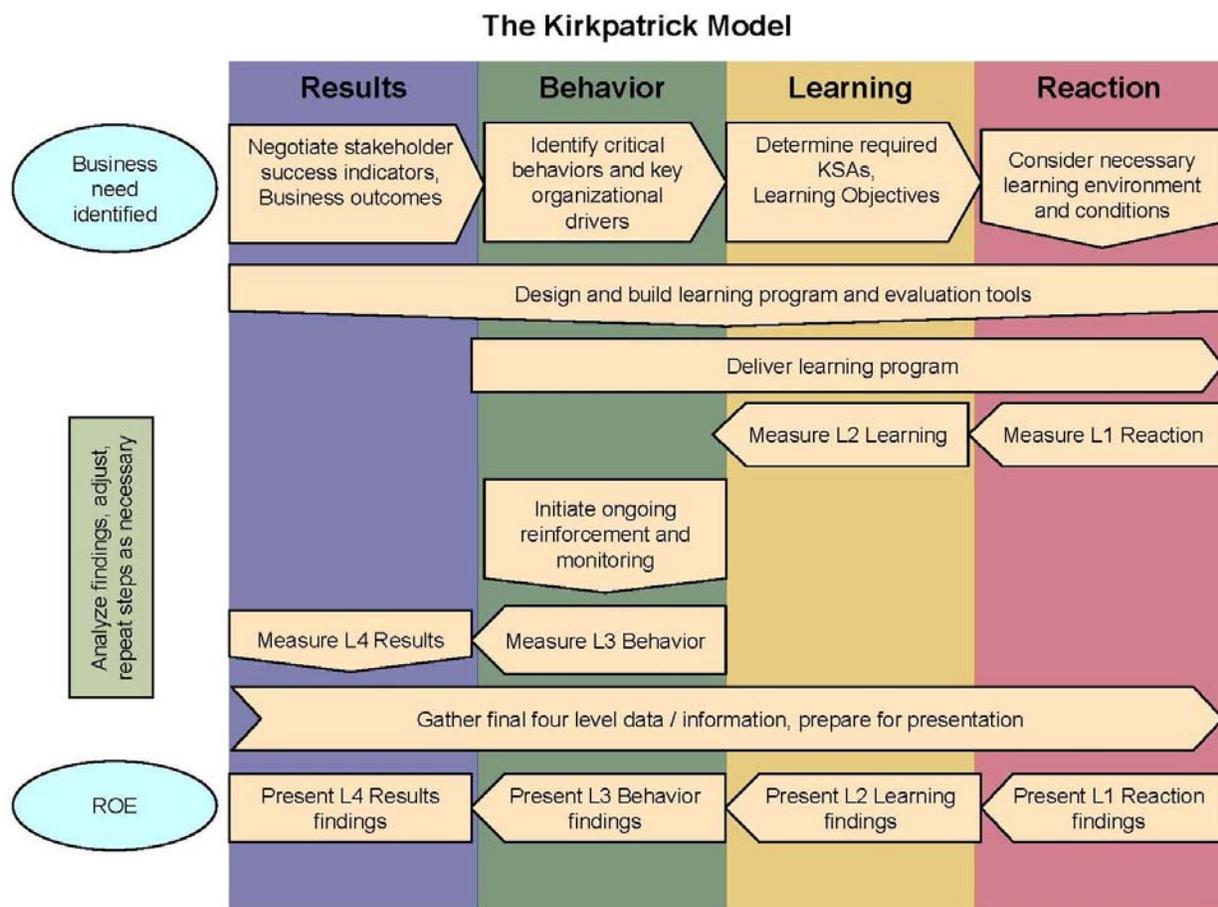


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## The Four Levels Are Not Just For Training Evaluation

Another commonly held misconception we hope to debunk is that the Four Levels are used only to measure the impact of training after it is complete. While they *can* be used for this purpose (and most typically are by learning professionals), the Four Levels are actually an integral part of every phase of a training initiative, from beginning to end.

We have illustrated this by shading the new Kirkpatrick Model to show that programs begin by considering what Results the business wants to accomplish. Then each of the other three levels is considered. And this pattern continues all the way through the model. In fact, all four levels are addressed at almost every step in the process! To reflect this reality, we are no longer referring to the model as the Kirkpatrick Four Level Evaluation Model, as this is, to some degree, a misnomer. As you can see, the new name of the model is simply the Kirkpatrick Model.



### The Window Washers

Let's put some real faces on what we have talked about. In the right margin there are photos of two men who seemingly have the same job. The first is a man that I (Jim) saw in front of a hotel in Asia. While I was waiting for a taxi, I went up to him and asked him,

"What is your job here at the hotel?"

Without looking at me, he answered,

"I wash windows."

Since we had little else to talk about, I went back to my taxi-watching post (but I did snap his picture as I walked away).

The next day, I was in the country of Brunei, conducting another workshop. During a break, I wandered over to this young man and asked him,

"What is your job here at the resort?"

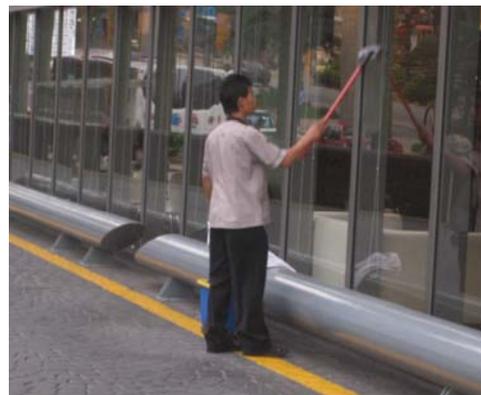
Chai (who later introduced himself to me by name), stopped what he was doing, walked over to me, looked me in the eye and said;

"I am part of the team that creates exceptional experiences for our guests."

After I picked my jaw off the ground, we carried on quite a conversation, which included Chai asking me about my stay, if I had everything I needed, what I thought of *his* grounds, and what I thought of *his* country.

On my way back to the U.S., I thought about Window Washer #1 and Chai. They were both about the same age, so why were their answers to the same question so different? Of course, my thoughts went to training and reinforcement. I never found out what kind of training Window Washer #1 received (he probably took a job down the street when he was offered a modest raise). Chai, on the other hand, told me about his orientation, training, and the coaching and encouragement he received from his supervisor. He was taught that he was in training in order to *learn, perform, enhance his career possibilities*, and ultimately *serve as an ambassador for his resort and his country*.

In short, Chai received training and reinforcement that modeled what we have presented here. While his windows were no cleaner than Window Washer #1's, he knew that the purpose of training and development and *his* purpose were tied to the bigger picture. So he did more than just clean windows. He made me feel like a welcome guest so I would want to return.



**Window Washer #1**



**Chai**

### An Urgent Call to Action

So there you have it. A new visual for the Kirkpatrick Model that we hope better conveys the entire process and essence of what Don Kirkpatrick designed 50 years ago. The sound, timeless principles upon which it is based. And now, a challenge and opportunity for you.

With the recent changes in the economy and the world, there is no better time to create a new standard within the learning industry. Allow me to explain with a personal story. We have a cement walk leading to the front door of our home. As I (Jim) was walking up the path shortly after we were married, I noticed the former owners depressed the footprints of (I assume) their small child, and carved his or her initials into the sidewalk.

Upon seeing this “legacy” left for all to see, I went into the house, asked Wendy where a screwdriver was, and proceeded back outside to add my own mark. Well, obviously the cement had dried since 1995. I was too late to leave my mark on the front walk.

You, however, are *not* too late to leave your mark in the learning industry. During this time of economic challenge, and when our industry is under fire, the good news is that business leaders – our jury members – are looking everywhere for solutions to their incredible challenges. You have the unique opportunity to provide significant answers for them – and to carve out a new learning legacy by becoming *true strategic business partners*. Fortunately, these economic times won't last forever. This creates a limited time frame and urgency for you to take action before the cement dries (or the rock bridge collapses).

Following one of our training sessions, I received an e-mail from one of the participants. She says it all:

“This was one of the most insightful and worthwhile training events that I've taken in awhile. I look forward to reading more of your work – your father and you are very inspiring. Too often we think “training design and development” and we don't spend nearly enough time in evaluation at the beginning. This training was so eye-opening – you made a “Brunei Window Washer” out of me.”

Kat Siedlecki, Booz Allen Hamilton, OS Learning Team

Thanks, Don, for a very useful 50 years. Thanks for showing us a path to creating true value to the business world, and the people we serve. Now it is up to all of us to heed your warning, and effectively apply what you and others have taught us.



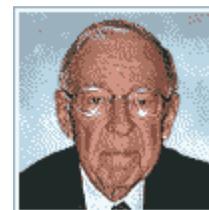
## About Don Kirkpatrick

Don Kirkpatrick, PhD, is professor emeritus at the University of Wisconsin. He is the creator of the Kirkpatrick Four Level Evaluation Model, the foremost training evaluation tool in the world. He is one of the most sought after speakers in the workplace learning and performance field.

Don is the author of numerous books on training evaluation and HR topics.

Don is a past president of the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD). He has been honored with the *Lifetime Achievement in Workplace Learning and Performance* award from ASTD, and is a member of the *HRD Hall of Fame* of Training Magazine.

Read more about Don at <http://www.linkedin.com/in/donaldkirkpatrick>. Contact him at [dleekirk1@aol.com](mailto:dleekirk1@aol.com).



## About the Authors

**Jim Kirkpatrick, PhD**, is the Vice President of Global Training and Consulting for SMR USA. He presents workshops and provides consulting to Fortune 500 companies around the world, including Harley-Davidson, L'Oreal, Ingersoll Rand, Honda, the Royal Air Force, and GE Healthcare.

Jim has co-written three books with his father, Don Kirkpatrick, the creator of the Kirkpatrick Model.

Read more about Jim at [smr-usa.com](http://smr-usa.com) and <http://www.linkedin.com/in/kirkpatrickfourleveevaluation>. Contact him at [jim.Kirkpatrick@smr-usa.com](mailto:jim.Kirkpatrick@smr-usa.com).



**Wendy Kayser Kirkpatrick** is the director of Kirkpatrick Partners, LLC. She is a certified instructional designer. Wendy conducts seminars and facilitates corporate meetings. She draws on 16 years of experience in the business world to make her training relevant and impactful with measurable results.

Read more about Wendy at [kirkpatrickpartners.com](http://kirkpatrickpartners.com) and [linkedin.com/in/wkkirkpatrick](http://linkedin.com/in/wkkirkpatrick). She welcomes your comments. Please contact her at [wendy.Kirkpatrick@kirkpatrickpartners.com](mailto:wendy.Kirkpatrick@kirkpatrickpartners.com).



Jim and Wendy have written a new book entitled *Training On Trial*, to be published by AMACOM books in early 2010.

## Looking For More Information?

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[Don and Wendy's event schedule](#)

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Don, Jim, and Wendy would be happy to speak to you about incorporating Kirkpatrick content into your event, hosting a public program, or having a customized in-house session.

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### Watch for *Training On Trial*, coming in February 2010!

We are excited about our latest book from AMACOM Publishing.

[Book overview](#)

