Evaluation Masterclass: Linking Evaluation Theory to HRD Practice

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This is one of six innovative sessions organized by the AHRD Scholar-Practitioner Committee. It examines how research and theory can be applied to inform common practitioner questions on evaluation. By examining use of research and theory to inform evaluation practice, session attendees will consider how to improve their own evaluations and link research and practice in HRD. Session combines presentations from experienced researchers with opportunities for small-group discussion on key aspects of the evaluation process.

Keywords: Evaluation, Research-to-Practice.

This session is one of six innovative sessions being proposed as a package by the AHRD Scholar-Practitioner Committee. It addresses one of the highest ranking topics in the June/July survey of AHRD members. To position the session firmly within the Scholar-Practitioner Track, it will examine common practitioner questions on evaluation and how research and theory answer those questions and can inform practitioner actions. Examples of the questions to be explored are:

- How do I evaluate the impact of HRD?
- How do I evaluate programs that are intended to have benefits over a long time period, such as leadership development training?
- How do I evaluate learning and behavior change for skills-related training?
- How do I get key stakeholders, such as middle and senior management, interested and involved in evaluation?
- How do I identify the barriers to transfer that hinder the extent to which training influences behavior on the job?

The session is designed to demonstrate how research and theory can inform evaluation practice and, in so doing, can provide answers to practitioner questions and ultimately to improve HRD practice. By focusing on evaluation, the session addresses a frequent topic of interest and concern for both HRD academics and practitioners, and provides practical advice that attendees can apply in their own work.

Goals

The session goals are:

1. To surface common practitioner questions about evaluation.
2. To demonstrate how research and theory can inform answers to those questions.
3. To provide practical advice that attendees can apply in evaluating their own HRD.
4. To provide attendees with an opportunity to discuss evaluation practice and research with their peers.
5. To provide attendees with an opportunity to meet, and ask questions of, leading researchers in the area of HRD evaluation.

Session Content

Human resource development (HRD) practitioners continue to be asked to evaluate the effectiveness and impact of programs in various organizational settings, including for-profit and non-profit organizations, local, state, and federal government agencies, universities, and foundations (Bassi & Lewis, 1999; Bober & Bartlett, 2004; Brown & Seidner, 1998; Chelimsky, 2001; Preskill & Russ-Eft, 2003). Both internal and external customers are asking for evidence of program effectiveness and contributions. This continued and increasing attention to evaluation represents an extremely important development, and it provides HRD researchers, practitioners, and evaluators with several significant challenges. Most practitioners operating within organizations lack an in-depth knowledge of evaluation theories and approaches (Russ-Eft & Preskill, 2001). Of even greater concern, few HRD researchers and evaluators have considered their work within the context of organizational learning, performance, and change (Gilley & Maycunich, 2000).

Recognizing the need for some evaluation approach that would take into account the complexity of the organizational context, Russ-Eft and Preskill (2001) and Preskill and Russ-Eft (2003) introduced the systems model for evaluation. More recently Preskill and Russ-Eft (2005) provided a variety of teaching and training exercises to illustrate important aspects of the model.

This model proposed that factors within the evaluation itself (such as the evaluator's background and experience), within the organization (such as the leadership), and outside the organization (such as globalization) affect the program and the evaluation and are, in turn, affected by the program and the evaluation.

At the same time, stakeholders within the program and the evaluation process tend to be demanding different kinds of information. In some instances, stakeholders think that they want summative information or information related to the return on the investment for the program (e.g., Kirkpatrick, 1994; Phillips, 2003; Swanson & Holton, 1999). As described in Russ-Eft and Preskill (2005), many of these requests are best fulfilled with other, related information – such as what skills and knowledge have been acquired. By involving key stakeholders throughout the design and conduct of the evaluation, the evaluator is better able to identify factors important to the program and the evaluation as well as the types of information that can be used by the various stakeholder groups.

Description of Format, Style and Agenda

The session will be structured as follows:

1. Introduction and session overview (5 minutes)
2. Small-group discussion to identify the critical questions about evaluation from practitioners. The results will be collected and categorized, and used later in the session (15 minutes)
3. Overview of a systems model for evaluation, based on the literature (20 minutes)
4. Formation of small-groups to discuss questions (20 minutes)
5. Large group debrief and further discussion of questions. Identify literature and issues that were not addressed by the small groups. (20 minutes)
6. Review literature references for further study (5 minutes)
7. Wrap-up: summary of the main points from the session (5 minutes)

References

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