Evaluating action learning: tick-box exercise or powerful change process?

Mandy Hetherton, Senior Associate at Action Learning Associates, explores the challenges and opportunities in evaluating action learning

Evaluation
The making of a judgement about the value of something.

Action learning
A method for individual and organisation development, based upon small groups of colleagues meeting over time to tackle real problems in order to get things done, and learning from their experience and from each other.

Which of these statements do you agree with?

Evaluating action learning is....

A. ....a tedious, tick-box exercise which results in a report nobody reads.

B. ....a powerful and engaging change process for individuals and organisations.

Whether you said A or B, you are absolutely right – either can be true.

This whitepaper explores the different approaches to evaluating action learning, and identifies the key factors in making evaluation less of a tick-box exercise, and more of a powerful change process:

- Start by evaluating organisational readiness for action learning
- Engage different stakeholders to assess expectations
- Use a range of methods and qualitative as well as quantitative data
- Gather evidence of emergent and unexpected results, as well as predicted outcomes
- Assess not only participants and the intervention but also how the organisation has enabled the intervention.

Traditional evaluation approaches – Kirkpatrick & ROI

Probably the best-known model for evaluating learning in organisations is Kirkpatrick's 4 Levels, developed in the late 1950s and recently updated (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2009).

Evaluating at level 1 – reaction to learning event or the 'smile sheet' – is the most common form of assessment.

Level 4 evaluation – achievement of targeted outcomes – is much rarer (O'Driscoll, 2006, found that only 8% of surveyed organisations evaluate at level 4). Why is this?

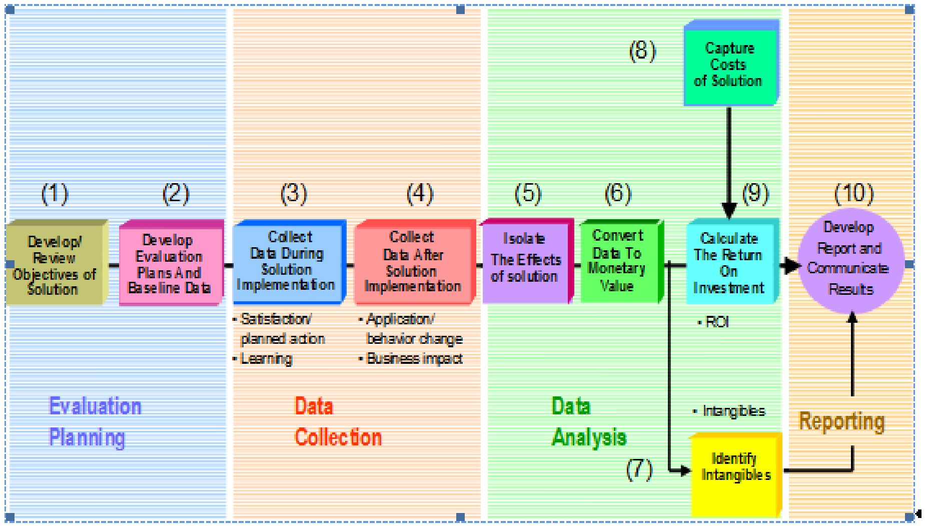
Gathering reaction data from an often captive audience at level 1 is easy and economical compared with the challenge of gathering, analysing and interpreting data over the longer term which is required at the higher levels. The model offers little guidance on how to do this, or deal with issues preceding and following the learning event, such as: stakeholder engagement; communication of findings; and ensuring that findings affect decision-making (Pearce and Donaldson, 2008).

But perhaps its biggest flaw is that correlation between the levels is weak – i.e. a positive result at one level does not necessarily lead to a positive result at the next (Thomson 2009). Multiple factors affect changes over time, with the ensuing difficulty of establishing a causal relationship between the original intervention and outcomes. By focusing on the learning event and the participants' reactions, the model tends to sideline the contextual factors that affect the event and its impact.

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

Another well-known approach to evaluation of learning is the ROI (Return on Investment) methodology (Phillips, 2008), developed in the late 1980s. It adds three additional stages to Kirkpatrick's 4 levels.

Its key feature is the calculation of the monetary return in investing in a programme.



The ROI process starts with *Evaluation Planning* and finishes with *Reporting.* Between these stages lie *Data Collection* – essentially Kirkpatrick's 4 Levels – and *Data Analysis*. Data Analysis is where the results of the intervention are converted to a financial value, enabling a cost-benefit analysis.

Those results which cannot be monetised are 'intangibles' (Phillips, 2009) and have a secondary importance:

> '[...] intangible measures are not normally used to justify continuing an existing program... Intangible benefits are often viewed as additional evidence of the program's success and are presented as supportive qualitative data.' (Phillips, 2009)

In ROI, only financial quantitative data really matters. 'Intangibles', evidenced by qualitative data, are relegated to a supporting role. The model risks either minimising these results, or forcing an essentially hypothetical and subjective financial value onto them. Yet intangibles – such as an action learning participant developing the skills to coach their team – can lead to significant organisational benefits such as increased employee engagement over time.

A second criticism of the ROI method is that it sounds more scientific than it actually is. Step 5 is 'Isolate the effects of solution'. In the scientific experimental tradition, this is done by creating a control condition and an experimental condition, which are identical in every regard, and comparing the results. But in an organisational context how achievable is this? Is it really possible to select two groups of people who are identical in terms of all the different factors that might affect their learning? Guidance on the ROI model acknowledges that isolating the solution is challenging, and suggests instead *estimating* its effect compared to other factors (Hamso, 2011).

So what sounds like a scientific, objective approach is likely, in practice, to be based on a subjective assessment.

Realistic not scientific – the importance of context

Both the Kirkpatrick and ROI models are based on an apparently scientific/experimental approach – set objectives, apply intervention, isolate effect of intervention and measure results. But how appropriate is this where there are multiple variables, and human agency plays a big part in determining outcomes?

It may be helpful to consider the wider field of evaluation. Evaluation as a discipline emerged in the United States in the 1950s/60s, driven by the need to assess government-funded social programmes to aid future decision-making (Donaldson & Scriven 2003), and is now a global, cross-disciplinary practice.

A key development in the field has been the concept of realistic evaluation (Pawson and Tilley, 1997). Rather than adopting the scientific/experimental approach underlying Kirkpatrick and ROI, realistic evaluation recognises the complexity of social environments, and the impact of those environments on both intervention and outcomes.

> 'Whereas the question [...] in traditional experimentation was, “Does this work?” or “What works?”, the question asked by us in realistic evaluation is *“What works for whom in what circumstances?”*' (Tilley, 2000:4)

So what works in one context may not necessarily work in another. Organisational context includes many factors such as culture, stakeholder values, timing of the intervention, business priorities, participant attitudes, etc. Reg Revans, the founder of action learning, was well aware of this when he identified leaders’ attitudes towards an AL programme as one of the key factors affecting its chances of success (Revans, 1998).

Two key points follow from this recognition of the impact of context:

- Before starting an action learning intervention, evaluate the level of organisational support for action learning.
- Ensure that the evaluation of an intervention includes some assessment of the organisational factors which have supported or hindered it.

Another lesson from the wider evaluation field is to use a range of methodologies and data, depending on 'which approach provides more meaningful insights to the [...] intervention under scrutiny' (Wang & Spitzer, 2005). A Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development survey (Anderson 2007) proposes that evaluation should include both quantitative and qualitative information across four areas:

- learning function efficiency
- key performance indicators and benchmarks
- Return on Investment
- Return on Expectation – what stakeholders expected the intervention to achieve.

In this multi-perspective framework, ROI is one measure but not the primary one. Identifying stakeholders’ Return on Expectation involves dialogue before, during and after the intervention, and opens the door to a much wider range of data than the ROI approach.

However, there is still the question of what happens to *unexpected* results. What might be missed by focusing evaluation on pre-determined objectives?

Embracing unpredictability

Dotlich & Noel (1998) identify a key issue in evaluating AL:

> 'Other training programs […] come with stated outcomes; they can be controlled, predicted and charted. Action learning is much less easily controlled or charted.' (1998:16-7).

In AL, participants help each other to address complex real-life issues which have no simple answer. Such issues often require new ways of thinking and acting, with a shift in values and assumptions. And not all problems or issues can be predicted at the start of the programme. Even where Al is focused on an overall theme or project, the challenges which participants encounter may be unexpected and highly individual. Inherent in AL, therefore, is a high degree of emergent learning and actions, and these should be included in the evaluation.

However, including unpredicted outcomes in the evaluation does not mean that initial objectives cannot be set. Any action learning programme might be expected to:

- build participants' coaching skills
- increase their self-awareness
- enable them to make progress with workplace problems.

Participants can also be encouraged to set their personal objectives at the outset; thinking about expected outcomes at the start is useful for interim evaluation during the programme. Predicted and emergent outcomes both have their place in the evaluation process.

Recognising emergent outcomes is one of the factors considered by Carter (2006) in a review of evaluating coaching. Other issues which render the Kirkpatrick/ROI models insufficient are:

1. Organisations and individuals may have different objectives
2. Impact may occur over a long time-frame
3. The coach's skills and coach/coachee relationship affect outcomes
4. The act of evaluation may affect the coaching process.

Any of these factors could also apply to AL. Carter proposes a multi-perspective framework which evaluates three *areas* (individual learning/action, organisational learning/action, and programme processes), and seeks evidence from four *sources* (coach, coachee, organisational measures, and documents).

Evaluation here is a participative process, including 'bottom-up' evaluation derived from experiences during the programme, as well as 'top-down' evaluation of individuals' learning/performance against intended objectives. For example, coachees can assess how well their line managers have enabled them to apply their learning; coaches can give feedback on the administration of the programme. This demonstrates a realistic evaluation approach when evaluating complex environments and interventions with unpredictable results.

To summarise so far: Although evaluation of learning interventions has historically been based on a narrow scientific paradigm of predictability and quantitative /monetised measures, recent developments take a more realistic and flexible approach suitable for complex environments. Emphasising dialogue between stakeholders, and using a range of methods and perspectives to evaluate, these newer approaches are better able to take account of emergent learning and the impact of context factors on an intervention's success.

Working with diverse stakeholders

In any organisational intervention, there are a range of stakeholders, with different interests and requirements, and therefore different reasons for evaluating. Early engagement and dialogue with stakeholders allows the evaluation to be planned so that the results will be plausible and useful for stakeholders.

Easterby-Smith (1994) usefully distinguishes summative and formative reasons for evaluation:

Summative reasons	Formative reasons
Proving that the intervention worked or had measurable impact	**Improving** the process and delivery of the intervention
Controlling (e.g.) access to programmes, costs	**Reinforcing** learning by using evaluation as a contribution to the learning process itself

Thomson (2009) comments that summative reasons are more likely to be held by budget holders, to rely on 'hard' data, and to require quick answers, whereas formative reasons are more likely to be held by developers, who value rich information including the impact of context on learning and performance.

There are challenges in reconciling these different needs – for example, there is a tension between a requirement for quick answers (budget holders) and valuing rich data (developers) which by its nature tends not to yield quick answers. But as with all potential conflicts, early recognition of different perspectives makes it more likely that these can be successfully addressed.

If AL is being introduced for the first time into an organisation, summative reasons may be high on the agenda. Demonstrating the value of an AL intervention to stakeholders with a focus on the bottom line requires a willingness to speak the language of ROI, while at the same time building an understanding of the wider and longer-term potential impacts, such as employee engagement, and the importance of organisational support for the intervention. By contrast, once key stakeholders are convinced of the value of AL, the focus may shift to formative reasons.

Which evaluation methods can meet these different purposes?

Methods and types of data

A range of methods, drawing on multiple sources and types of data, can be used to evaluate AL; the choice of approach must be driven by what stakeholders will find plausible and useful.

Continuous informal evaluation throughout the intervention has the formative purpose of improving the process and delivery, and reinforcing learning. Such evaluation will often be in the form of dialogue and exchange of ideas, for example when:

- participants and facilitators review how the action learning meetings are working
- participants discuss whether they are achieving their objectives
- participants report back to their line managers
- facilitators discuss with commissioners any organisational issues which are impacting the success of the programme.

At the end of the intervention, the focus is likely to be summative evaluation to demonstrate the impact. Participants' assessment is by far the easiest and most economical data to gather – however, allowing sufficient time for this can make it much richer than a standard Kirkpatrick Level 1 'reaction to learning event'. For example, participants can retrospectively score themselves at the beginning of the intervention and then at the end, to benchmark change; emergent as well as predicted outcomes can be included. At action learning meetings, participants will have regularly reflected on the impact of their actions, building their ability to report evidence by the end of the programme, including how their outcomes relate to organisational goals.

Participants can also evaluate organisational factors which have impacted their actions and how to improve future programmes.

Although participant data is easy to gather, further evidence may be required to strengthen it (triangulation) and make it credible to other stakeholders. For example, consider a manager who realises during action learning that her 'command and control' style of managing is not working, and that she needs to develop a different, coaching style. Her learning and actions could be evidenced by:

- the participant's own story (qualitative self-assessment)
- review of 360 feedback before and after the programme (quantitative and qualitative assessment by others)
- gathering team performance data to show impact on outcomes over time, while acknowledging that other contextual factors will affect these outcomes (quantitative objective measures).

If AL is new to an organisation, it may be useful to develop a few case studies of participants in this way, where the longer term impact is tracked. Such detailed, longitudinal evaluation is not practical for every participant in every programme but it can help demonstrate the potential value of AL as an intervention.

Communicating the evaluation results may be seen as a final step — but it can also be a process which is itself evaluative. For example, at the end of an AL programme, senior stakeholders may meet participants to hear about their learnings and actions. And if there is willingness, senior stakeholders can invite participants' insights into organisational issues, which may be challenging but ultimately useful. Evaluation here becomes more of a dynamic process leading to further change, rather than an activity resulting simply in a report.

Conclusion

The methods best suited to evaluating AL are participatory, multi-method, continuous, and informed by needs of different stakeholders. Acceptance of such methods, however, is not automatic. It depends on valuing a qualitative, realistic evaluation paradigm which can capture emergent learning, with the implication that learning cannot be completely predicted or controlled. So a key part of the process is a pre-evaluation – of organisational understanding of and support for AL.

What are the implications for those involved in designing evaluation?

1. Recognise that introducing AL – or any other intervention – involves assessing **organisational readiness** for it. Practitioners need to understand the factors affecting AL's success, including the implications of an emergent form of learning and action, and be able to discuss these with stakeholders.
2. To engage at an early stage with **stakeholders** – what do they expect from the AL programme? What do they know? How might they use this information? What kind of evidence do they value, and is this likely to demonstrate the value of the intervention?
3. To be aware of the range of evaluation **methods**, and to consider how different sources and types of data can address different requirements and interests. Understanding the theoretical basis for multi-method and realistic evaluation enables practitioners to move beyond a simplistic, end-point approach.
4. To frame evaluation as an **organisation-wide process** by engaging stakeholders from the start. This requires political skills to resolve potential conflicts of interest and to influence choice of an approach which is appropriate for the intervention.
5. Ensure that evaluation assesses how the **context** has supported the intervention, by considering factors such as leaders' readiness for challenge; support for participants from line managers; and enabling of action.

By making the evaluative process realistic, contextual and meaningful to different stakeholders, it becomes much more than a tick-box exercise. Preskill & Donaldson (2008) suggest that evaluation can be:

> '[...] an ongoing process for investigating and understanding critical organization issues. It is an approach to learning that is fully integrated with an organization's work practices and as such it engenders:
>
> (a) organization members' interest and ability in exploring organization issues
>
> (b) organization members' involvement in evaluative processes and
>
> (c) the personal and professional growth of individuals within the organization.'

Building evaluation into everyday organisational life is an ambitious goal but a powerful way to address the challenges of evaluating AL and other learning interventions.

References

Anderson V. (2007) 'The Value of Learning: From return on investment to return on expectation'. *Research into practice* report. London: CIPD.

Carter, A. (2006) *Practical Methods for Evaluating Coaching.* Institute for Employment Studies.

Donaldson, S.I., Scriven, M. (eds) (2003) *Evaluating Social Programs and Problems.* Taylor & Francis, London

Dotlich, D.L. & Noel, J.L. (1998) *Action learning: how the world's top companies are re-creating their leaders and themselves*. Jossey-Bass, San Francisco

Easterby-Smith,M. (1994) *Evaluating management development, training and education*. Gower, Aldershot

Hamso, E. (2011) 'The ROI Methodology' whitepaper accessed at http://www.eventroi.org/methodology/

Pawson, R. and Tilley, N. (1997) *Realistic Evaluation*. Sage, London

Phillips, J and Phillips, P (2008) *The Basics of ROI* accessed at http://www.humanresourcesiq.com/hr-technology/columns/the-basics-of-roi/

Phillips, J and Phillips, P (2009) *Intangibles: Measuring the Hard to Measure and the Hard to Value* http://www.humanresourcesiq.com/hr-technology/columns/intangibles-measuring-the-hard-to-measure-and-the/

Preskill, H. and Donaldson, S.I., (2008). 'Improving the Evidence Base for Career Development Programs: Making Use of the Evaluation Profession and Positive Psychology Movement'. *Advances In Developing Human Resources,* **10**(1), 104-121.

Revans, R. (1998) *ABC of Action Learning* 3rd ed'n. London: Lemos & Crane

Thomson, I (2009) *Evaluating learning and development* (CIPD) accessed at http://www.cipd.co.uk/subjects/lrnanddev/evaluation/evatrain.htm?IsSrchRes=1

Wang, G.G. and Spitzer D.R., (2005). 'Human Resource Development Measurement and Evaluation: Looking Back and Moving Forward'. *Advances In Developing Human Resources*, 7(1), pp. 5-15

Copyright Policy