

Putting that Smile Back into Smile Sheets (Aug 06)

August 25, 2006

OK, maybe those smile sheets aren't all that bad after all. Sure, everybody's using them, but that doesn't mean that everybody is using them correctly. Try these nine suggestions for putting that smile back into your smile-sheet evaluations.

By Sarah Boehle

Avoid beauty contents

Don't focus smile sheets on questions that turn Level I into a beauty contest designed to measure an instructor's popularity or whether he did a good job, author Neil Rackham says, and start designing your Level Is purposefully in order to get the data you really need. Focus questions, he says, "on what needs to be changed in the program in order to make it better-with a focus on the learning, not on the instructor."

Don't try to prove; try to improve

The companies that use Level I well, Rackham says, are those that take data gathered after each session and look at it to determine what should be changed in order to improve training, not to prove something. "You can get real results from Level I and make very significant improvements to programs by using that kind of methodology, but my own estimate is that less than 10 percent of companies conducting Level I are doing it this way-and that's very optimistic."

Think "perceived impact"

If you want to know whether people learned, ask them how relevant the training was. To measure relevance on Level Is, Rackham asked students to rate their learning from "not at all relevant to me and my job" to "very relevant." This relevance scale was found to have a high positive correlation with learning. "Curiously, it appears that people's rating of relevance has a higher correlation with learning than their rating of learning."

Customize

Some of the biggest smiley sheet offenders, according to Jim Kirkpatrick, a senior consultant in the evaluation practice area at Corporate University Enterprise, Falls Church, Va., are organizations that mechanically administer the same old, tired smiley sheets course after course. Don't squeeze every learning event into a standard Level I questionnaire. Instead, target your use of Level Is by asking yourself, "What information would I like to get from this course?"

Set the stage

Most often, reaction sheets are given out in person at the end of a course. "This is a de-motivator for participants," Kirkpatrick says. Add to this the fact that students are rushing to get out of that training class, he says, and the percentage of completed forms is low-and the percentage of valid forms is even lower. So, what's the solution? "Spend a few minutes telling [trainees] why the evaluation questions were chosen, what has been done with feedback in the past to improve programs," Kirkpatrick says.

Ask for honest feedback

Trainers often "correct their own preposition by saying some fun little thing at the end of training to try to

get students feeling good right at the end before evaluations are filled out," Kirkpatrick says. "Or, they neglect to say that Level I information is needed to improve the course."

Delay evaluation

Consider evaluating training a month or more after a course has ended instead of at the end of a course, Will Thalheimer of Work-Learning Research recommends. "One of the problems associated with delivering Level I's right after a course is that learners are overly optimistic about predicting how much they will remember."

If you can't delay, reschedule

Do not throw evaluation in at the end of class when people are packing up and in a hurry to leave. Instead, conduct Level I earlier in the course, and allow ample time. Patti Shank, an instructional technology and design consultant at Learning Peaks in Denver, for example, says she doesn't wait until the end of a course to evaluate.

Employ multiple mechanisms

In addition to a formal Level I questionnaire, hold mini-focus-group sessions and ask participants how they would redesign or improve the training. "First, it tells you some useful things about how to make the training better, which is valuable in itself." Rackham says. "Second, it is one of the greatest re-enforcers of learning because you're making people think about what they learned and what wasn't clear to them."

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