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Evaluating Training

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Evaluating the outcomes of training is a challenging task. The goal is to assess changes in three areas: knowledge, attitude, and behavior. Acquiring knowledge—concepts or facts—ranges from orientation to becoming an expert. Changing attitudes—values, beliefs, or feelings—means rethinking ideas, considering alternative views, or forming attitudes about new topics and issues. Learning new behavior—new or enhanced skills—is the most powerful outcome of training. Behavioral change is the most difficult outcome to achieve, but may be the most important.

Evaluation information is collected essentially three ways: questionnaires, interviews, and observation. Evaluation can occur prior to the event, during the training, or following the activity. Often, a combination is used. Pre- and post-test models also can be used and work well for skills training, such as technology workshops.

The most common approach to assessing training is self-assessment by participants. This method asks participants to rate their own changes in attitude, knowledge, and behavior. Evaluation conducted at an event can ask about changes in attitude and knowledge, but it primarily addresses *planned* changes in behavior. The exception to this would be changes in demonstrated skills, such as those in technology training. Documentation of behavior change that occurs in the workplace after training needs to be collected after the training. This information can be collected by evaluators chiefly via questionnaires and interviews.

Organizers and trainers also gather evaluation information via observation. This observation aids in adjusting the training during an event and provides another perspective on learner participation and changes. For example, observers can note variances in level of participation in discussions or lack of attention to a particular topic. Guidelines should be established for the observation, especially if using participants or other people to observe an event. This helps assure consistency in the observation process. In addition, for in-house training, supervisors can directly observe changes in behavior.

Evaluation Process for Thinking Outside the Borders

Since the goal of Thinking Outside the Borders was to develop individual training modules that could be used independently by other organizations and trainers, a model of continuous improvement guided the evaluation process. Feedback from the evaluation process and use of a planning committee helped to assure that changes occurred throughout the project.

Evaluation information was gathered in multiple ways. Written questions and observation were used during the event. Interviews with planners and questionnaires were used following the event.

Expectations

Participants were first asked about their expectations for the institute. The purpose of this was to determine the uniformity of understanding about the goal of the training and to potentially help interpret the responses to the institute by participants. Each person was asked to respond to two questions prior to the training: 1.) What are your expectations of the Thinking Outside the Borders program? 2.) What do you hope to learn from this institute? Responses indicated that a great variance of perspectives existed about the purposes of the training. The most consistent outcome expected by participants was building an international network of colleagues.

Leadership assessment

The institute used the Campbell Leadership Descriptor as a tool for self-assessment of leadership skills. To assess the usefulness of this tool for an international audience, participants were asked to complete a short questionnaire during the evening following its application. Three questions were used for this activity.

- How did your previous perceptions of your leadership abilities change as a result of the leadership assessment (Campbell)? If there was no change, please indicate this.
- What leadership skills do you feel you need to develop further? If none, please indicate this.
- What are two activities you will carry out as a result of the assessment of your leadership skills? If none, please indicate this.

This evaluation process showed that almost all participants identified changes in perception and all identified leadership skills to further develop. The third question was used to help participants plan on follow-up activities and provide insights into planned changes of behavior. Patterns in responses also suggest future training activities, with diplomacy, entrepreneurialism, and management identified most often across the four institutes.

Other data collection during the event

Evaluators also can gather information during an event by using flip charts and adhesive notes. For example, during the first institute, participants were asked to name international leadership skills on one day and specific learning from the disaster preparedness session another day. The question was written on flip charts and participants wrote answers on adhesive notes. This allows for a quick assessment, and the responses can be easily grouped

and shared back with the participants and planners. This is a quick and flexible way to gather evaluative information during training.

Observation

In addition to the invited learners, members of the planning committee and others attended the institutes. This group was asked to be observers for the training. The goal was to observe presenters, participants, planners, and the interaction among these people. Each observer was asked to write down their observations using the following guidelines.

- Level of engagement of participants during presentations and exercises.

Are people attentive? Were they engaged in other activities rather than listening to presenters or note taking?

- Response of participants to content in the presentations.

Were people listening more intently or taking more extensive notes at certain times during presentations?

- Questions asked during the institute related to content and logistics.

- Inclusiveness of all participants in the discussions and exercises.

- Problems or barriers to communication in discussions and exercises.

- Leadership occurring in the discussions and exercises.

Is leadership shared? Is there a discussion of who will lead?

- Conversations you hear about the institute content or logistics.

- Ability of the presenters and facilitators to communicate ideas to the group.

- When did the audience seem confused by an explanation? How well were presenters and facilitators able to answer questions?

- Changes in session attendance.

- Informal interactions among members of the group, especially cross-cultural exchanges.

- Differences in response to the institute from the international and United States librarians.

- Planning committee coordination.

The written observations were used by the evaluator and became the basis for the debriefing telephone conference with planners that occurred after the institutes. The follow-up telephone interviews allowed organizers to reflect on what worked well and what needed further development. These discussions had a major impact on decisions regarding future institute activities, as clear changes occurred from one institute to another.

Questionnaire

The primary method used for participant feedback was a written questionnaire sent via email to all participants. This was distributed four-to-six weeks after the event. Two follow-up reminders were sent. The exception to this process was the last institute in Nebraska. Since this event occurred near the end of the IMLS grant, the questionnaires were gathered immediately after the institute.

The questionnaire asked about expectations, usefulness of individual sessions, effectiveness of presenters, and amount of learning in specific topic areas. These questions used five-point rating scales to gather information. For usefulness, participants were asked to choose from a scale ranging from *extremely useful* to *not useful*. For presenters, the five choices were:

- Inspirational and informative
- Enhanced my learning
- Okay
- Detracted from my learning
- Terrible

To assess their learning, participants were asked to rate how much they learned on a variety of topics. This scale ranged from *a great deal* to *nothing*. The questions elicited a range of responses, although in all cases the majority indicated that they learned *a great deal* or *a good amount* about at least one of the topics. This, of course, varied by topic and institute as did the rankings in the group of responses. At the second institute, for example, the group indicated they had learned the most about disaster preparedness. International librarians, however, reported learning the most about leadership, while for the U.S. librarians it was cross-cultural communication.

Because a desired outcome was building an international network, participants also were asked, “How many of the participants did you meet and talk to by the end of the institute?” The choices were *just a few*, *some*, *about half*, *the majority*, and *everyone*. For all the institutes, almost all the participants indicated either *the majority* or *everyone*.

All the rating questions accomplished three things: 1.) showing differences among the international and U.S. librarians, 2.) providing overall ratings for the institute, and 3.) offering an efficient method for analysis. Across the institutes, U.S. librarians tended to rate the usefulness of the program sessions lower than did international librarians. Why this is the case is not clear. Is it because U.S. librarians participate in a wider range of training and, therefore, are more critical? Would the reverse be true if the U.S. librarians had traveled to another country for the training? Many of the U.S. librarians indicated that they had already participated in some form of leadership training, which may have affected their ratings on that topic.

As each institute evolved, the results of the evaluation affected the design of the institute. One area of the training that changed for each institute related to the topic of multiculturalism and diversity. Program design and content varied. Working together, sharing information about local library services and issues, and social events afforded multiple opportunities

to broaden multicultural perspectives. Yet, when asked to rate the usefulness of sessions on this topic and the amount learned about multiculturalism and diversity, these ratings tended to be lower when ratings for each topic were ranked. By design, the participants made up a multicultural group so that learning could occur naturally, yet it was difficult to satisfy the needs of the group in this topic area. As the institutes evolved, however, more opportunities for sharing among participants were developed, which resulted in more formal information sharing about local library services.

Another method used in the questionnaire to assess changes were three open-ended questions.

- In what way(s) did the institute influence your global awareness of library issues and services? If it had no influence, please indicate this.
- How did this institute help you build relationships with librarians from other countries?
- What do you think you will use the most from your participation in this institute?

The responses to these questions provided perspectives on the institute in the participants' own words. The answers gave a more in-depth view of the impact of the institute on learners. These comments illustrated the value and outcomes of the institute and illuminated the results from the rating scales. Because learners come to training with varied backgrounds and expectations, the most significant outcome of the training varies. It is in these responses that the impact on individuals is most evident.

Typical of training evaluations, several questions were asked about the agenda and local arrangements. These included questions about what program sessions to delete or add.

Interviews

While not used for these institutes, evaluative information could have been collected using interviews. Individual interviews by telephone or in-person focus groups would allow an evaluator to probe for deeper understanding of responses from learners. The questionnaire, however, is an efficient method for gathering information from an international audience, but trainers need to consider the option of interviews if the circumstances would allow for this type of evaluation. A focus group immediately after training could be another approach to gather initial feedback from participants.

Follow-up

For three of the institutes, follow-up questions were sent to participants several months after the event. The goal of this data collection was to elicit examples of impact from the training, especially behavior changes. The biggest challenge was garnering feedback from more than a few participants. In the case of the second institute, international and U.S. librarians were paired to undertake a partner project after the institute. Over half of the participants responded to a request for updates on the partnerships. The main impact was in maintaining communication with the partner, and some sharing of materials occurred. Limited time was listed most frequently as a barrier to more activity between partners. While getting learners to provide follow-up information is challenging, it can illustrate long-term effects and also reinforces the learning that occurred at training. Maintaining

blogs was not part of the project design, but efforts for group communication met with limited success.

Other Considerations

Efficiency and effectiveness are two critical issues in evaluation. While multiple strategies can be used to gather evaluation information, realistically there is a limit on the amount of time most organizers and trainers have for evaluation. In addition, repeat demands for feedback from training participants can have a negative effect on their view of the learning experience. The goal is to focus on what are the most important outcomes to document. This focus helps to assure that efficient information gathering centers on the results that have the greatest impact on improving training.

Follow-up with training participants is the ideal method for measuring the long-term impact of training. The challenge, however, is maintaining contact and the learners' willingness to participate in the feedback process.

While email has simplified contacting participants, it is extremely difficult to get feedback from a majority of participants. Without a powerful incentive, evaluators will be frustrated by low responses after the event. This feedback—especially related to changes in behavior—still makes follow-up a valuable strategy, but evaluators will have to be realistic about the level of participation.

The longer the time period after the training, the more difficult the follow-up process is. Telephone interviews can be effective for follow-up, but time and cost factors often rule out this approach. This would be more manageable if the evaluator used a small sampling of participants for the telephone interviews.

Multiple factors affect the outcome of training. Planners and trainers do not have exclusive control over the outcomes, as learners come to an event with varying backgrounds, skills, and perceptions. In addition, environmental factors (e.g., weather, facility) have an effect.

Receptivity of a library to the person who attended training is a major factor in retention of learning. If the participants are unable to incorporate changes in their work or there is a lack of interest in the training information by the library, it is difficult to make use of new information. When people return to work, a full workload also works against continuing the learning and building on a new network of colleagues from the training.

Learner needs vary, but careful attention to the needs of adult learners will help assure that training is effective. Adults bring a great deal of experience to training, so that experience needs to be integrated and related to new learning. Adult learners tend to be oriented toward application of learning, so the relevancy of training to current and future needs is critical. Multiple learning styles and different paces for learning also need to be considered in the design of training. By taking into account some of the basic principles of adult learning, trainers and organizers can help to increase the impact of learning activities.

Conclusion

Evaluation of training addresses both learning and the quality of training. Determining what works, i.e., best practices, is a desirable result of the evaluation process. During the evaluation process, information on desired training or future learning needs also can be collected. This needs assessment component adds value to the evaluation process.

It is, unfortunately, too easy to concentrate on the design and marketing of training and ignore evaluation. Nevertheless, in the business of training, organizers and instructors also need to keep learning. This is an essential function of evaluation. By focusing on the most important information needed and designing an efficient process, a continuous learning model can be applied to training activities. In this scenario, all those involved in the learning process benefit.