How paradoxical that evaluation, a main purpose of which is to establish value, often seems to return the lowest value of anything we do! Instead of being vital to our activities, evaluation too often ranks as our worst chore. Too commonly, in the authors’ experience, evaluation is avoided or paid as little attention as possible. Due to its typically unloved nature, evaluation can be trapped in a low-level, minimalist regimen that requires and delivers little, yet burns resources and garners ill will. Because the potential of evaluation is ultimately to prevent the waste of significant amounts of resources or money, it needs to be structured and empowered to do its job. That is, evaluation needs to be given the same star status afforded to other major business tools. To leave evaluation in its black hole is to risk handicapping performance, eroding competitiveness, and putting learning investments at risk. Instead, we can elevate it to a profoundly useful, powerful tool by basing it on a learning evaluation strategy (LES).

In our own consulting practices, we are often asked to evaluate performance improvement efforts, especially training programs. Too often, such evaluations have been conceived as ad hoc, stand-alone projects unconnected to other evaluation activities. Sadly, such a project may be the only evaluation ever conducted in the organization. In these cases the evaluation team must start from scratch to design and conduct the evaluation, and the resulting project can be long and frustrating. You are familiar with the phases of a typical evaluation project, outlined in the sidebar “Evaluation Project Phases.” The sample questions in each phase hint at the complexity, length, and cost of each effort, although these questions are by no means exhaustive.

For ongoing, regular training evaluation, most organizations (74%) use reaction questionnaires (Sugrue & Kim, 2004). These are important because they measure client satisfaction. However, they are of limited utility because they do not measure learning, improved performance on the job, or contribution to organizational goals (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2005). By some estimates, only 31% of organizations routinely assess at Level 2 (learning) and 14% at Level 3 (behavior). Level 4 (results) assessment is used by only 8% of organizations (Sugrue & Kim, 2004). The low frequency of evaluation is bemoaned by many (for example, Phillips, Phillips, & Hodges, 2004), yet this frequency has shown little improvement over the years. Regardless of the amount of evaluation done or the number of levels used, most evaluation activities are not effectively tied to an overall strategy, and this diminishes the value of an evaluative effort.

What are the common roadblocks to conducting training evaluation, concerns that could cause organizations to avoid evaluation or do it poorly? Table 1 summarizes the major concerns that the authors hear frequently expressed. These concerns are legitimate, given what is known about the current state of evaluation practice. We have found that having a LES greatly streamlines and enhances evaluation activities while eliminating or minimizing many of these roadblocks. Let’s look at what a LES is and how it makes evaluation more efficient, useful, and doable in the real world.
**What Is a LES?**

A LES is a document that sets out the organizational context for evaluation, the purposes or high-level goals of evaluation, and the overall evaluation approaches to be taken. It ties these elements to the organization’s overall strategy and goals, thereby guiding decisions about what information to collect, how to interpret it, and how to act on the findings. A LES is the foundation on which a coherent and strategic evaluation policy can be built. A policy sets the standards for evaluation practices in the organization, specifying what will be done and how often. The policy in turn drives the plan, which lays out how, when, and by whom the policy will be implemented, and the specific, step-by-step procedures by which the plan will be carried out. Figure 1 illustrates the elements of a LES and how they are used. In this article, we use the term LES inclusively to refer to the strategy document itself and the policies, plans, and procedures derived from it.

Table 2 shows elements of a LES we recently developed for a leading financial services company. This is a partial list of the organization’s goals:

- Ensure that our financial advisers perform as well or better than any of our competitors’ advisers.
- Get new hires operational 20% faster than we have in the past.
- Upgrade and strengthen our image with Wall Street analysts.
- Significantly reduce the risk and cost of defending against compliance-related lawsuits.

Space limitations do not allow us to provide a complete example of a LES, so Table 2 gives only illustrative examples. In these examples, notice how the strategy elements are the foundations for the progressively more detailed policies, plans, and procedures.

A LES is a living, evolving document that stays ahead of emerging issues in the business environment and in the training field. The LES should be regularly updated to align with changing organizational goals, changing customer requirements, newly identified competencies, and so forth.

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**Table 1. Common Concerns About Evaluation.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concern</th>
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</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>Nobody uses evaluation results.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No respect</td>
<td>We might look bad and lose credibility.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**Developing a LES**

Now that we have defined LES and shown examples of how business goals can be linked to evaluation strategy, let’s consider how to create a LES in your organization. Having worked with various client organizations, we recommend the following guidelines for developing a LES.

**Inputs to the Process: What You Need to Begin**

- The overall organization’s mission, strategy, and goals (all kinds of goals: scientific, financial, image, customer satisfaction, employee satisfaction, growth, and so forth)
- The training department’s (or performance improvement department’s) mission, strategy, and goals
- Results of a customer study that has identified factors important to customer satisfaction
- Results of an employee competency study that has determined what employees should be doing
- Legal and regulatory requirements

**Process for LES Development**

- Hire a consultant if nobody inside the organization has done this before. When you are moving away from any
Our evaluation program supports and strengthens the ongoing quality improvement of ISD, ensuring high-quality training and shortening time to deployment.

Beginning in 3Q 2006, approximately 25% of our courses will be reviewed each quarter by a subject matter expert (SME) panel convened for that purpose.

The training manager will assign courses to ISD leads. Leads will convene SME panels, hiring outside SMEs as needed, coordinate with legal, and report findings to the training manager.

We will consolidate and report publicly on the business impact of our training activities, which will strengthen the perception among Wall Street analysts and investors of our company's competence and growth potential.

We will monitor quarterly the number and types of customer complaints regarding compliance issues. We will develop a phase-in plan over several years.

All vendors responsible for course development will be notified by 02-01-06 of the requirement for Level 2 assessment by 12-30-06. The training manager will receive quarterly a report from compliance summarizing current noncompliance issues.

The training manager will receive quarterly a report from compliance summarizing current noncompliance issues. Within 30 days, content owners and ISD leads will review relevant parts of courses and recommend specific revisions. Course development teams will revise courses as required within the current quarter.

Table 2. Examples of LES Elements.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LES Elements: Example A</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Strategy</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Policy</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Plan</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Procedure</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LES Elements: Example B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Strategy</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Policy</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Plan</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Procedure</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LES Elements: Example C</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Strategy</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Policy</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Plan</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Procedure</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

• Revise after all stakeholders review and comment.
• Have a formal sign-off page for key decision makers.

Members of the Task Force

• Manager of the training function
• His or her boss (advisory or review capacity)
• Person responsible for evaluation, if there is one
• Manager of training development (presumably an instructional systems design [ISD] person, and if not, then an ISD person should also be a member of the team)
• A few line managers
• Human resource representative
• Information technology (IT) representative
• If possible, market research representative

Selling the LES

Formulating and adopting a LES elevates training evaluation into upper management’s realm, with concordant resistance but also with recognition and commitments when you are successful. Delivering the necessary persuasion at
this level is often the most challenging task you will face, but it must be done if the effort is to succeed. You must make the argument that evaluation of training effectiveness is integral to doing good business. Fortunately, this is precisely what concerns executives most. Here are some insights we have found to be helpful in this effort.

Change agent principles are worth reviewing. (For an excellent model of change agent practice, see Dormant, 1992.) The first task is stakeholder identification: Who is affected by this change? Next, create buy-in by forging relationships at multiple levels in the organization through explaining (and expanding) the list of benefits and also through learning about and countering perceived roadblocks. Establish and court the program’s champion, whose ability to defend against naysayers will depend on his or her relationships with stakeholders and the savviness of the arguments used. Most decision makers covet the facts and figures of business impact, the very products a training evaluation program will provide. The case for managers is likely to hinge on factors of implementation cost, degree of intrusion on operations, time to presentation of outcomes, and perceived value.

Understanding how the integration will occur is the cornerstone for acceptance and moving forward, particularly with IT, legal, and compliance stakeholders. Explaining the

Evaluation Project Phases

When evaluation happens on an ad hoc basis, each evaluation team must follow these project phases and answer questions such as these:

**Define the problem.** What exactly are we evaluating? What questions do we need to answer? What performance gap (if any) initiated the training? What are the goals and objectives, and how can we determine if they have been reached? What do the various stakeholders expect from this evaluation? How will they use the results?

**Design the method.** What is the unit of study (learner, course, curriculum, business unit)? What variables will we measure, and how can they be operationalized? What design is possible: control group, before and after, or time series? What are the best data sources for each research question? What sampling plan and data collection methods will we use?

**Develop the instruments.** Which existing instruments can we use, and which new instruments will we develop? Are the instruments valid and reliable? How can we improve them?

**Collect and analyze data.** How can we minimize data collection pitfalls (for example, a low response rate)? What methods will we use to summarize and analyze data? How will we interpret the results? What do the data really mean?

**Report conclusions and recommendations.** How can we tailor the information to different stakeholder audiences? How is bad news best communicated? How do we clearly and economically (especially visually) represent the most relevant and prodigious outcomes? How can we get decision makers to expect and integrate this key information into their ongoing management decision-making process? How can we encourage decision makers to act on our recommendations?

As illustrated here, evaluation projects can sometimes be complex, difficult, and long. In contrast, when an organization has a LES in place, most of the questions have already been answered. Those responsible for conducting the evaluation activities, then, are freed from the time-consuming tasks of problem definition, evaluation design, and instrument development. Instead, they can focus their efforts on periodic data collection, using predetermined instruments and procedures, analyzing the data, and generating conclusions and recommendations. Organizational effectiveness is bolstered by the generation and utilization of far more appropriate and decision-focused information. Rather than looming as the most onerous task on your to-do list, evaluation can become the door to an improved level of organizational effectiveness and esteem for the training operation. The projected result: improved targeting of resources and greater achievement of overall goals. This undeniably raises the value of evaluation, demonstrating clearly that you can do more with a LES.

The payoff is evident, because evaluation activities flow from evaluation strategy, which ties to organization strategy. Everybody cares.

Implementation plan will further reduce opposition as people realize that their contribution will not perhaps be as overwhelming as they first envisioned. Being able to articulate the what’s in it for me (WIIFM) factor at multiple levels is key. Strategies for overcoming sabotage, which many a challenge to the status quo has failed to encounter, will be helpful. Principally, these strategies involve having a well-selected and even better prepared champion, thoroughly building positive relationships with key stakeholders, and driving home the message that the innovation will improve the way the organization does business.

**Impacts of a LES**

People are more likely to accept a change when the negative impact on them is small and the benefits are large. The successful LES implementation must anticipate and deal directly with impacts on key stakeholders.
Evaluators

Those responsible for planning and carrying out training evaluation will find if not a lighter workload certainly a more satisfying one. A well-designed LES features streamlined evaluation procedures. For example, rather than evaluating the impact of individual courses, an entire curriculum might be evaluated at Level 3 (behavior) via supervisor observation of on-the-job behaviors that represent broad competencies. In cases where job performance is already tracked (for example, sales performance), existing data may be used to partially assess Level 4 (results). By viewing evaluation as a whole system, rather than as piecemeal projects, economies of effort can be realized.

Managers

The impacts of the LES on managers will be mostly positive because managers will be able to make better decisions with the information they receive from the new evaluation system. (Managerial buy-in to the LES may prove a surprising measure of who really wants to know whether training has affected performance relative to managerial support.)

Vendors

Impacts for vendors include aligning their products with whatever evaluative tools, measures, and programs are adopted. Although this may result in additional expenses at the outset, the benefits of being able to demonstrate the value their product or service adds to the training investment and organizational performance will be substantial. Vendors should be part of any LES design effort and lobby for their product or service to be evaluated with equal rigor.

Organizations

Enhancing the organization’s image, competitiveness, value, market ranking, or industry reputation is a further way in which systemized evaluation can provide positive impact. Few entities have comprehensive, serious, professional training evaluation programs, and creating awareness that this is the standard for any operation will elevate the organization’s status and efficiency.

Learners

Where the LES specifies Level 2 assessments, learners may have to take a little more time to complete their learning tasks. The benefits, again, clearly outweigh the costs. Where learning is linked to certification requirements, academic credit, or compliance with professional practice regulations, proof of mastery is essential for learner continuation or advancement in the practice area. In many cases, however, learner workload may be reduced. For example, the effectiveness of a curriculum may be measured unobtrusively by observing a small sample of past learners or by doing data-mining studies of individual on-the-job productivity metrics.

Training Developers

Training developers may be initially concerned about the proposed impact of a LES system because they may perceive that more requirements will be imposed on design and development activities. In fact, a good LES process may add very little effort to the design process. Once the evaluation system is designed to collect data on how well instructional objectives have been met, these data can provide developers with the means to demonstrate program and personal effectiveness. Training managers will also have supplemental data to defend their budgets.

Table 3. How a LES Addresses Concerns About Evaluation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concern</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
<th>How a LES Helps</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No payoff</td>
<td>There is no payoff; nobody cares.</td>
<td>The payoff is evident because evaluation activities flow from evaluation strategy, which ties to organizational strategy. Everybody cares.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No support</td>
<td>Management doesn’t support evaluation activities.</td>
<td>Managers have bought into the evaluation strategy and understand that they need the results for decision making.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No expertise</td>
<td>We don’t know how to do it; our staff have limited skills.</td>
<td>The policies, plans, and procedures reduce the need for evaluation skills because many activities are routinized.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No time</td>
<td>Evaluation projects are chaotic, ad hoc collateral duties that take too much time.</td>
<td>Standard operating procedures are assigned as regular, highly effective duties. Ad hoc projects are few.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No system</td>
<td>Our courses are not developed using good instructional design, so they are hard to evaluate.</td>
<td>Evaluation policies can drive better instructional design policies and practices.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No use</td>
<td>Nobody uses evaluation results.</td>
<td>Procedures specifically address how results will be used, when, and by whom.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No respect</td>
<td>We might look bad and lose credibility.</td>
<td>Forward-looking, actionable evaluation encourages continuous improvement rather than finger-pointing. Everyone looks good.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Rather than looming as the most odious task on your to-do list, evaluation can become the door to an improved level of organizational effectiveness and esteem for the training operation.
**Benefits of a LES**

In our experience a LES focuses all the organization’s evaluative efforts more efficiently and greatly increases their impact. Having an LES will:

- Position the evaluation service as an essential management resource.
- Set up evaluation procedures that can be conducted by modestly trained evaluators.
- Ensure that only necessary data are collected, in the least intrusive and most efficient manner.
- Make instructional designers’ jobs easier by making clear what will be evaluated, how, and when.
- Specify the flow of data and recommendations to the appropriate decision makers in formats suited to their needs.
- Supply necessary and accurate data to drive decisions and actions related to the training and performance system.
- Declare a process for accountability, because people will be acting on the LES report recommendations.
- Provide a mechanism for continuous improvement and the evolution of strategies, policies, plans, and procedures.

Finally, Table 3 revisits the persistent concerns listed earlier (in Table 1) and shows you how having a LES helps an organization overcome them. 

**References**


Sarah Ward is an adult learning specialist who focuses on using e-learning technology to improve and measure performance. Through her company, ALTER Inc., she has consulted with the world’s largest distance learning system, Ford Motor Company’s FORDSTAR, and the world’s largest repository of knowledge, the Library of Congress. She uses the latest in learning technology to increase workforce productivity, through strategic planning of organizational learning, developing e-learning models, consolidating education and training efforts into corporate universities, and creating full spectrum evaluation systems. Sarah may be reached at sward@alter-inc.com.

Godfrey Parkin, originally a South African marketing professional, has a global perspective. He spent many years in Switzerland running A. C. Nielsen’s international management services operation, training marketing consultants and implementing OD initiatives worldwide. He headed a Zurich-based consulting company specializing in marketing and sales team transformation and culture change. He bootstrapped a technology company in the United Kingdom to build and market innovative simulation products, computer games, and animation properties. In 1998, he started a successful project management e-learning company in Washington, D.C., and founded MindRise, his consulting company, soon afterward. Godfrey may be reached at gparkin@mindrise.com.

Karen Medsker is an owner and principal consultant of Human Performance Systems, Inc., a small firm that helps organizations improve performance, primarily through developing custom training programs. For 17 years, Karen taught instructional design, performance improvement, and evaluation at Marymount University, where she is now Professor Emerita. She is the author of two books on instructional design as well as a variety of book chapters and journal articles. She is coeditor (with Michael Cassidy) of *Performance Improvement Quarterly*. Karen may be reached at hpsi@adelphia.net.