

**The Kirkpatrick Four Levels®**  
**A Fresh Look After 55 Years**  
**1959 – 2014**

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# THE KIRKPATRICK FOUR LEVELS®



Donald L. Kirkpatrick, Ph.D.  
1924 – 2014

The ultimate intent of the four levels was then, and is today, to show the business value and worth of training.

## A Celebration of Don Kirkpatrick's Legacy

This year, the 55th anniversary of the Kirkpatrick Model, the training and evaluation industry lost a legend with the passing of Dr. Donald Kirkpatrick. In November of 1959, Don first published his thoughts on training evaluation with a series of four articles in the *Journal of the ASTD*. He did not call them levels, and he did not coin the phrase Kirkpatrick Four Level Evaluation Model. He did, however, use the legendary four words that comprise the foremost training evaluation model today: Reaction, Learning, Behavior and Results.

As we reflect on Don's life and celebrate the anniversary of the four levels, we thought it would be appropriate to first honor Don and his work, and then to share with you how the four levels have both evolved and remained relevant over the last half century.

## The Day of Reckoning Has Arrived

When we conduct workshops on the Kirkpatrick Model all over the world, we find a surprising number of misconceptions about it. After 55 years, it is time to set the record straight. Rather than attempt to clarify the many misunderstandings about the four levels, we will focus on the salient elements of the model and show you how to leverage its power at a time when the day of reckoning has arrived for the entire learning industry.

Don's incredible vision was evident in this quote from one of his colleagues back in 1959:

"Managers, needless to say, expect their manufacturing and sales departments to yield a good return and will go to great lengths to find out whether they have done so... likewise, training directors might be well advised to take the initiative and evaluate their programs *before the day of reckoning arrives.*"

*"The Experimental Evaluation of Management Training: Principles and Practice," Daniel M. Goodacre III, The B.F. Goodrich Company, Personnel, May 1957*

This statement represents what the ultimate intent of the four levels of evaluation was then, and is today – to show the business value and worth of training.

Before unveiling the Kirkpatrick Business Partnership Model, we will present the Kirkpatrick Foundational Principles. These are the cornerstones of the Kirkpatrick Model and the keys to successful implementation of training programs.

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## The Kirkpatrick Foundational Principles

### 1. The end is the beginning.

Most learning professionals have heard of the four levels, and many can recite them. Relatively few, however, know how to effectively get beyond Level 2. When presenting these concepts to groups of professionals, we often refer to current evaluation practice as,

“smile sheets (L1), pre and posttests (L2), and hope for the best (L3 and L4).”

Most of our workshop participants know exactly what we are saying.

In 1993, Don wrote his first book on the four levels to explain the entire model, which is and always has been more comprehensive than four simple levels. On page 26 of *Evaluating Training Programs: The Four Levels* (1<sup>st</sup> Edition, Berrett-Koehler, 1993), Don wrote:

“Trainers must begin with desired results and then determine what behavior is needed to accomplish them. Then trainers must determine the attitudes, knowledge, and skills that are necessary to bring about the desired behavior(s). The final challenge is to present the training program in a way that enables the participants not only to learn what they need to know but also to react favorably to the program.”

Unfortunately, this message has been overlooked by many learning professionals. For decades, practitioners have attempted to apply the four levels after a program has been developed and delivered. It is difficult, if not impossible, to create significant training value that way.

All this is said in an effort to distinguish the development of the plan to build effective programs and evaluation methodology, which starts with Level 4 Results (Fig. 1), from the actual data collection, which does begin with Level 1 and works forward through Level 4.

#### Level 4: Results

To what degree targeted outcomes occur as a result of 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

Figure 1. The Kirkpatrick Model

For decades, practitioners have attempted to apply the four levels after a program has been developed and delivered. It is difficult, if not impossible, to create significant training value that way.

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## Return on Expectations (ROE):

What a successful training initiative delivers to key business stakeholders demonstrating the degree to which their expectations have been satisfied.

Contrary to training myth and deep tradition, training events in and of themselves do not deliver significant positive, bottom-line outcomes.

## 2. Return on expectations (ROE) is the ultimate indicator of value.

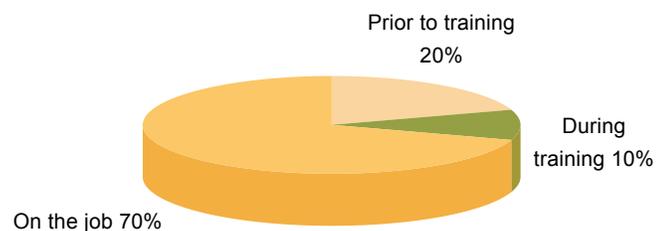
What normally happens when executives ask for new training? Many learning professionals jump to the task by retreating to their departments and commencing to design and develop suitable programs. While a training needs assessment may be conducted, contribution of the training effort at the organizational level is rarely defined.

A good amount of Kirkpatrick® Consulting involves coaching learning professionals to negotiate stakeholder expectations. This is a process in which learning professionals ask questions to clarify and refine the expectations of the key business stakeholders so that they satisfy the latter and can be achieved realistically by the former. Learning professionals then need to convert those rather generic expectations into observable, measurable success outcomes by asking the question, “What will success look like to you?” and continuing to ask questions until the outcomes are at the organizational level. Those success indicators then become the Level 4 outcomes – the targets – on which collective efforts can be focused to accomplish return on stakeholder expectations.

## 3. Business partnership is necessary to bring about positive ROE.

Contrary to training myth and deep tradition, training events in and of themselves do not deliver significant positive, bottom-line outcomes. What occurs before and after formal training programs is more indicative of the bottom-line results that training accomplishes (see Fig. 2).

Learning professionals need assistance and partnership from the business for training to deliver the results it is expected to yield. Historically, the comfort zone of learning professionals has been Levels 1 and 2. This is likely one of the reasons why many learning professionals spend nearly all of their time there. The execution of learning programs and overall corporate strategy, however, occurs primarily at Level 3.



Josh Bersin and Associates, 2008

Figure 2. Where learning takes place

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Training professionals must call upon their business partners to identify what success will look like, and build a cooperative effort throughout the learning and performance process.

The degree to which coaching and reinforcement occurs directly correlates to improved performance and positive outcomes.

Research by Lombardo and Eichinger (*The Career Architect Development Planner*, Lominger Limited Edition, 1996) was the first to reveal that as much as 70% of employee learning occurs on the job versus in formal training programs. Many others have confirmed this phenomenon since. Clearly, training professionals need to reinvent their roles and become deeply entrenched in the business world and on-the-job environment to remain viable.

Training professionals must call upon their business partners to identify what success will look like and to build a cooperative effort throughout the learning and performance process.

Before training, learning professionals need to partner with supervisors and managers to prepare participants for training. Supervisors should explain to their direct reports what they will learn in training, why it is important, expectations for actions during and after the training event, and the kind of support they will receive throughout the process.

Even more critical is the role of the supervisor or manager after training. They are the key people to reinforce newly learned knowledge and skills through support and accountability.

The degree to which this reinforcement and coaching occurs directly correlates to improved performance and positive outcomes.

It is often said that a picture is worth a thousand words. Figure 3 depicts a signature Kirkpatrick image that illustrates the concept of business partnership. The business is on the left and training on the right, with a small bridge serving as a way to cross over.



**Figure 3. Signature Kirkpatrick bridge image**

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Business partnership, not the delivery of training programs, is the secret to positive outcomes.

It is not always easy to sell the value of this partnership to executives and managers because we have been in cahoots to perpetuate the myth that good training alone leads to positive results. Going forward, training must make a business case to business stakeholders that we need to work together to achieve acceptable program results. Business partnership, not the delivery of training programs, is the secret to positive outcomes.

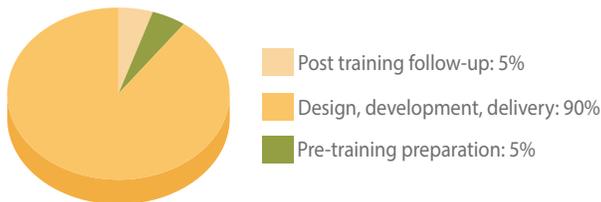
#### 4. Value must be created before it can be demonstrated.

In her research, Sandy Almeida, MD, MPH, identified statistical correlations between the four levels. Good correlation exists between Levels 1 and 2 in that positive learner engagement led to a higher degree of learning. Similarly, the correlation between Levels 3 and 4 was significant – if employees consistently performed critical on-the-job behaviors, individual and overall productivity increased.

No significant correlation existed, however, between Levels 2 and 3. In short, Almeida stated that even excellent training does not lead to significant transfer of learning to behavior, and subsequent results, without a good deal of deliberate and consistent reinforcement.

Consider those findings in combination with the results of a study conducted by Dr. Robert Brinkerhoff from Western Michigan University in 2005. He and his research team compared the amount of time spent developing and delivering training versus what actually contributes to learning effectiveness. Their results appear in Figure 4.

#### Group 1 - Traditional Learning Model

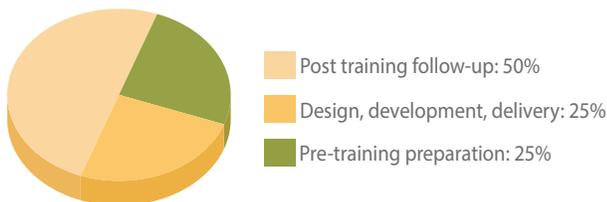


(a). Resources employed



(b). Training application

#### Group 2 - Business Partnership Approach



(c). Resources employed



(d). Training application

*Telling Training's Story, Rob Brinkerhoff, 2006*

**Figure 4. Factors that contribute to learning effectiveness**

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They found that typical organizations invest 90% of their resources in the training event itself, yet these events only contribute 15% to the on-the-job application of training graduates. The activities that led to the most on-the-job application were pre-training and post-training follow-up.

What does this mean? Most organizations are putting the majority of their time into designing, developing and delivering training (Levels 1 and 2) and only yielding about 15% of the possible benefit from the resources employed. Most organizations are spending relatively little time on the pre-training and follow-up activities that translate into the positive behavior change (Level 3) and subsequent results (Level 4) that we intend our training programs to deliver.

The bottom line is that it is essential for learning professionals to redefine their roles and extend their expertise, involvement, influence, impact and value into Levels 3 and 4.

## **5. A compelling chain of evidence demonstrates your bottom-line value.**

We believe that training – professionals, departments, and the entire industry – is on trial, accused of “not bringing enough value to the bottom line to justify our costs.” Business leaders act as a corporate jury, sitting in judgment of our performance and impact on the organization.

Our friend and colleague, Nick DeNardo, refers to data collected at Levels 1 and 2 as “consumptive metrics” and data at Levels 3 and 4 as “impact metrics.” If we are only providing our jury members with numbers of programs and attendees (Levels 1 and 2), we are basically shouting, “Look how much this is costing you!” and, thus, have a bulls-eye painted on our backs. If, on the other hand, we work our way backwards from Level 4 and include Levels 3 and 4 metrics for mission-critical programs, we are saying, “Look how much value we are bringing.”

A chain of evidence consists of data and information that sequentially connect the four levels and show the contribution learning has made to the business.

## **The Kirkpatrick Business Partnership Model**

The Kirkpatrick Model and the business partnership approach are sometimes misunderstood. This white paper provides a brief overview of these concepts. The book *Training On Trial* (AMACOM, 2010) discusses the entire model and the steps in creating and demonstrating organizational value in more detail.

The approach advocates presenting a chain of evidence that illustrates the value of the entire business partnership effort instead of isolating the impact of training, as training alone yields little organizational benefit. The model contains the same ideas that Don (and we) have been communicating over the last 55 years; because misunderstandings still exist, we created a new depiction of the steps in 2008. This depiction appears in Figure 5.

### **Consumptive Metrics**

Level 1 and Level 2 data indicating how much time and how many resources have been invested in training

### **Impact Metrics**

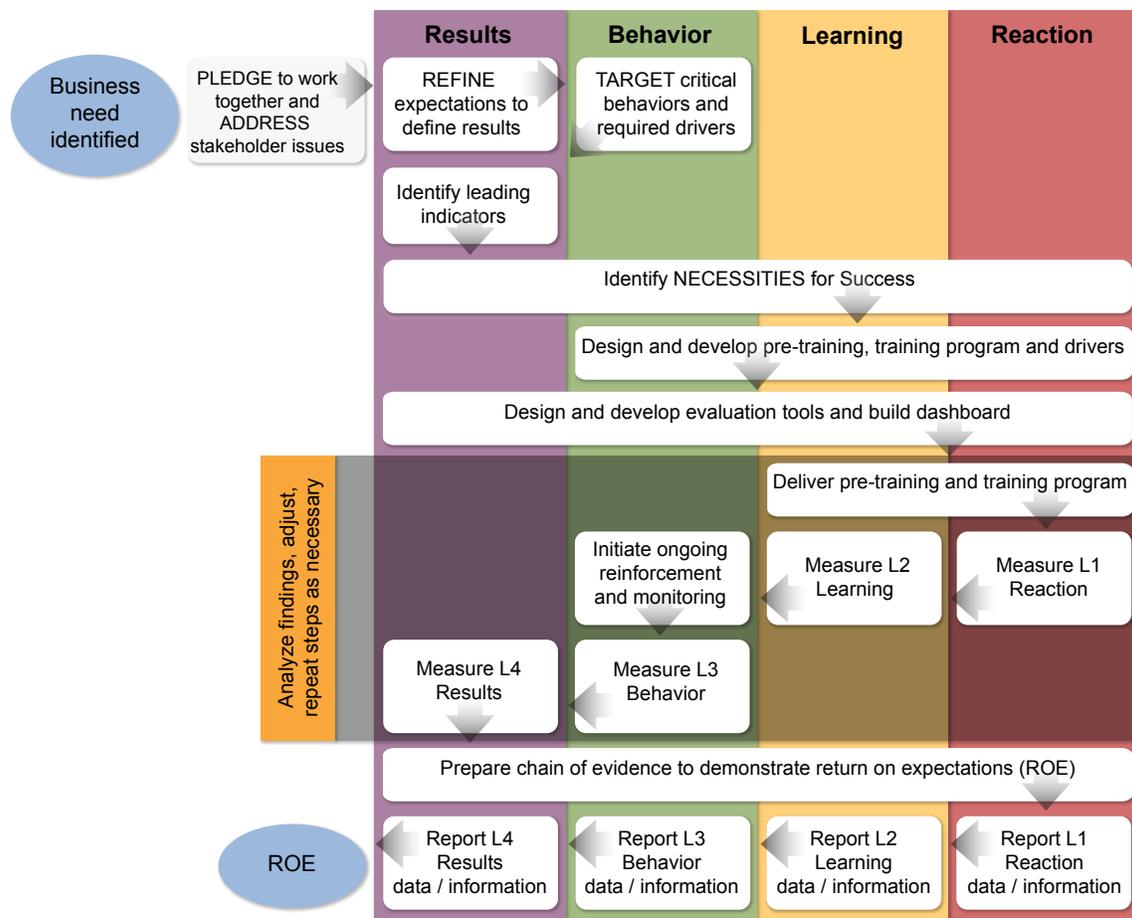
Level 3 and Level 4 data indicating the value and tangible results that training has delivered

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## Training Needs Analysis: The End Is the Beginning

Beginning in the upper left corner of the model, note that it starts with a formal connection between the business and learning, whereby a request is made to work toward resolving a business problem or to take advantage of a market opportunity. As noted previously, the end is the beginning because you are working from L4 to L1 in the first four steps. You will determine what success will look like (L4), and then subsequent critical behaviors and organizational drivers (L3). We identify critical behaviors as the few, key behaviors that employees will have to consistently perform on the job in order to bring about targeted outcomes. Required drivers, on the other hand, are the processes and systems that reinforce, monitor, encourage or reward performance of critical behaviors on the job.

Next, we consider the required knowledge, skills and abilities (KSAs), sometimes referred to as competencies, required for participants to be able to perform their new on-the-job behaviors (L2).



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Figure 5. The Kirkpatrick Business Partnership Model

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Strive to head off problems before they reduce the impact of the initiative.

Ongoing reinforcement and monitoring after training is one of the most critical steps in the model.

We subsequently address factors that support learning effectiveness and enjoyment (L1), including the learning environment, defined as the venue and modality for training, and the necessities for success, defined as the prerequisite items, events, conditions or communications that help leverage success or head off problems before they reduce the impact of the initiative (e.g., corporate culture, participant readiness).

Once a program is planned with the end in mind, instructional designers can begin designing and developing the indicated training content. At this point, you may discover that training is not required at all; often, on-the-job interventions to correct behavioral issues are the answer.

This is also the time to design the evaluation strategy and related tools instead of leaving this step until after training is complete, which is done all too commonly.

At this point, the training program is deployed, and formal evaluation of Levels 1 and 2 occurs. This is familiar territory for most learning professionals.

### Entering New Territory for Many Learning Professionals

The diagram (now moving back from right to left) starts to move into new territory at this point for many learning professionals. The next step is to initiate ongoing reinforcement and monitoring. This occurs after training is complete, and is the beginning of training value creation. At this point, an organization has the opportunity to move from consumptive training metrics to impact metrics.

It is often said that what gets measured gets done. At this point in the process, it is critical to monitor and measure the critical behaviors (L3), required drivers and leading indicators, which are the short-term observations and measurements suggesting that critical behaviors are on track to create a positive impact on desired results (L4). The data are used to ensure that behaviors and drivers are meeting standard and that positive outcomes are beginning to occur. It provides the data to create a dashboard to keep stakeholders – jury members – apprised of initiative progress.

This is also the time to partner with managers and supervisors who are responsible for ongoing coaching and reinforcement. Offer any assistance you can, and follow up with them frequently. While this step in the process looks like one small box, it actually often represents months, or even years, of effort. This is where you will see 50% of learning effectiveness occur. If done properly, it is where you can prevent 70% of the potential learning failure. In short, ongoing reinforcement and monitoring is one of the most critical steps in the model.

The orange box on the left side of the diagram is a reminder to analyze your findings along the way and make positive adjustments to the plan. If you determine that conditions are limiting the ability of associates to learn or apply the information, now is the time to call attention to such

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## Chain of Evidence



Level 1   Level 2   Level 3   Level 4  
Reaction   Learning   Behavior   Results

issues and create a backup plan. There is no value in going through the entire process to find out at the end that intended results have not been achieved because of something that could have been corrected months earlier.

A key differentiator between the Kirkpatrick approach and others is monitoring and adjusting the program during implementation. Instead of reporting what happened, you have the power to influence what occurs and maximize program results.

### Building Your Chain of Evidence

When you are satisfied with your preliminary findings at each of the levels, it is time to prepare the final data and testimonials that will make up your closing argument to the stakeholder jury. Present your chain of evidence from right to left, starting with Level 1 and moving step by step to create your value story through Level 4 Results.

This value-filled and evidence-based story will lead to a positive verdict, one that will allow your stakeholders to say that beyond a reasonable doubt, the overall learning initiative successfully contributed to the intended organizational results. For mission-critical programs, be sure to practice your oral presentation to your jury. It is always sad for us to see training departments that do great work fall short of impressing their stakeholders because they did not make an effective and compelling presentation.

### The Window Washers

Let's put some real faces on these concepts. This story is excerpted from the book *Bringing Business Partnership to Life: The Story of the Brunei Window Washer* (Kirkpatrick Publishing, 2013).

Figures 6 and 7 depict two men who seemingly have the same occupation. The first is a man who Jim Kirkpatrick met in front of a hotel in Asia. While waiting for a taxi, Jim asked him, "What is your job here at the hotel?"

Without looking up, the man responded, "I wash windows."

Jim, having little else to discuss with the window washer who failed to even make eye contact, returned to watching for a taxi, but snapped a photo of the back of the man.

The next day, Jim was in the country of Brunei conducting another workshop. During a break, he went outside into a courtyard. He wandered over to another young man (Fig. 7) who was washing windows at the time. Jim asked, "What is your job here at the resort?"

Chai, who later introduced himself to Jim by name, stopped what he was doing, walked over to him, looked him in the eye and said, "I am part of the team that creates exceptional experiences for our guests."

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“I wash windows.”

- Window Washer #1

Jim was shocked by this response. He carried on a conversation with Chai, who subsequently asked about Jim’s stay and if he had everything he needed to be comfortable, what Jim thought of *his* resort grounds, and even what he thought about *his* country of Brunei.



Figure 6. Window Washer #1

“I am part of the team that creates exceptional experiences for our guests.”

- Chai, the Brunei Window Washer



Figure 7. Chai - The Brunei Window Washer

On his way home to the U.S., Jim thought about Window Washer #1 and Chai. They were both about the same age, so why were their answers to the same question so different? His thoughts went to their training and reinforcement. Jim did not have the opportunity to find out what kind of training Window Washer #1 received (he probably took a job down the street when he was offered a modest raise).

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Chai, on the other hand, told Jim about his orientation, training and the coaching and encouragement he received from his supervisor. He was taught that he was in training in order to learn, perform, enhance his career possibilities and ultimately serve as an ambassador for his resort and his country.

In short, Chai received training and reinforcement that models the Kirkpatrick approach of starting with the end in mind and creating a program that does not end after the training event. While Chai's windows were no cleaner than those of Window Washer #1, he clearly understood his role in fulfilling the ultimate goals of the resort. Therefore, he did more than just clean windows; he made Jim feel like a welcome guest so that he would want to return.

### An Urgent Call to Action

With the continuing challenges of the world economy and questions about the organizational value of training investments, there is no better time to create a new standard within the learning industry.

There is a cement walk leading to the front door of Jim and Wendy's home. As Jim walked up the path shortly after their marriage, he noticed that the former owners had apparently depressed the footprints and carved the initials of their small child into the wet cement. Upon seeing this legacy left for all to see, Jim was saddened to realize that he was too late to leave his mark on his first home with Wendy.

Fortunately, you are not too late to leave your mark on the learning industry. During this time of economic challenge, and when our industry is under fire, the good news is that business leaders – our jury members – are looking everywhere for solutions to their incredible challenges. You have the unique opportunity to provide significant answers for them and to carve out a new learning legacy by becoming true strategic business partners. We hope that these economic times won't last forever, so there may be a limited time frame to take action before the proverbial cement dries.

Following one of our training sessions, we received an e-mail from one of the participants. She said it all:

“This was one of the most insightful and worthwhile training events that I've taken in a while. I look forward to reading more of your work – your father and you are very inspiring. Too often we think ‘training design and development’ and we don't spend nearly enough time in evaluation at the beginning. This training was so eye-opening – you made a ‘Brunei Window Washer’ out of me.”

Kat Siedlecki, Booz Allen Hamilton, OS Learning Team

Thanks, Don, for all you did to serve the learning industry with your seminal work. You showed us a path to create true organizational value with our training. Now it is up to all of us to follow the path and establish the learning industry as an essential piece of any successful organization.



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### About Don Kirkpatrick

**Donald L. Kirkpatrick, Ph.D.**, was the creator of the Kirkpatrick Model, the most recognized and widely used training evaluation model in the world. Don was Professor Emeritus at the University of Wisconsin and Honorary Chairman of Kirkpatrick Partners.

Don served as a national president of the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD). He was the recipient of Gordon Bliss and “Lifetime Achievement in Workplace Learning and Performance” awards, and a member of Training Magazine’s Hall Of Fame. In 2007, Don received the “Lifetime Achievement Award” from the Asia HRD Congress.

In May 2011, Don retired from public speaking and began using his musical and literary talent to write songs. On May 9, 2014, he passed away at the age of 90.

### About the Authors



**Jim Kirkpatrick, Ph.D.**, is Senior Consultant for Kirkpatrick Partners. He trains and consults for corporate, government, military and humanitarian organizations around the world. He is passionate about assisting learning professionals in redefining themselves as strategic business partners to remain a viable force in the workplace.

Jim conducts workshops on topics including maximizing business results, creating powerful training and evaluation strategies, building and leveraging business partnerships and increasing the transfer of learning to on-the-job behaviors.

Jim has co-written three books with his father, Dr. Don Kirkpatrick, the creator of the Kirkpatrick Model. He also has written three books with his wife, Wendy, including Training on Trial.

Connect with Jim on LinkedIn: [linkedin.com/in/kirkpatrickfourleveevaluation](https://www.linkedin.com/in/kirkpatrickfourleveevaluation)  
Contact Jim: [jim.kirkpatrick@kirkpatrickpartners.com](mailto:jim.kirkpatrick@kirkpatrickpartners.com)



**Wendy Kirkpatrick** is the founder of Kirkpatrick Partners. She applies her skills as a certified instructional designer and expert presenter and facilitator to lead companies to measurable success.

Wendy’s results orientation stems from her two decades of business and training experience, having held positions in merchandising, direct importing and product development. Wendy has written three books with her husband, Jim Kirkpatrick.

Connect with Wendy on LinkedIn: [www.linkedin.com/in/wkkirkpatrick/](https://www.linkedin.com/in/wkkirkpatrick/)  
Contact Wendy: [wendy.kirkpatrick@kirkpatrickpartners.com](mailto:wendy.kirkpatrick@kirkpatrickpartners.com)

Read more about Jim and Wendy, and their continuation of Don’s work, at [kirkpatrickpartners.com](http://kirkpatrickpartners.com).

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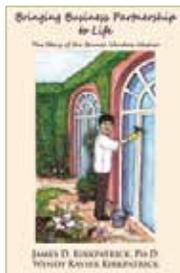
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We are happy to discuss the content of this white paper or your training evaluation needs. Contact our Kirkpatrick Consultant, Claire Smeaton on **0161 975 7112** or by email [claire.smeaton@dpgplc.co.uk](mailto:claire.smeaton@dpgplc.co.uk)

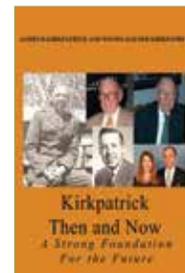
### Read Kirkpatrick books



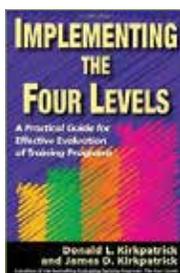
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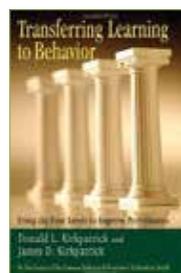
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