



# Learning Evaluation Theory: Kaufman's Five Levels of Evaluation

Provided by WatershedLRS.com

## Introduction

Evaluating learning programs is important. Without evaluation, how do we know if the courses, resources, and activities we lead people through are having positive impacts or just boring our learners to death?

This second whitepaper in our series on Learning Evaluation explores the Kaufman Model—one of many evaluation models—and its usefulness to L&D departments. You can find the first whitepaper, which explored Kirkpatrick's model, [here](#).

Kaufman's Five Levels of Evaluation is a reaction to and development of Kirkpatrick's four levels. Where Kirkpatrick's model divides evaluation by type of impact, mainly to the learner, Kaufman's model evaluates the impact on different groups.



Kaufman's main developments from Kirkpatrick are:

- the splitting of Level 1 into input and process,
- the grouping of Levels 2 and 3 under the "micro" level, and
- the addition of fifth level, mega.

Kaufman also sees Kirkpatrick's model as being restricted to training delivery, while his own model considers both delivery and impact.

One interpretation of Kaufman's levels is summarized in Table 1, including the corresponding Kirkpatrick levels. (Note: This is not how Kaufman presents the final form of his five levels. We'll explain why later).

| Kaufman | Kirkpatrick | Explanation  |
|---------|-------------|--|
| Input   | 1a          | <i>Resource availability and quality</i><br>These are training materials, digital resources, etc., used to support the learning experience.  |
| Process | 1b          | <i>Process acceptability and efficiency</i><br>This is the actual delivery of the learning experience.   |
| Micro   | 2 and 3     | <i>Individual and small group payoffs</i><br>This is the result for the 'micro-level client' (normally the learner). Did the learner 'acquire' the learning? Did he or she apply it on the job?    |
| Macro   | 4           | <i>Organizational payoffs</i><br>This is the result for the 'macro-level client', the organization, and includes evaluation of performance improvement and cost benefit/cost consequence analysis. |
| Mega    | n/a         | <i>Societal contributions</i><br>This is the result for the 'mega-level client', either society as a whole or a company's clientele.   |

### Input and process

The division of Kirkpatrick's Level 1 into input and process is perhaps the most practical and useful of Kaufman's suggestions. In a world that allows quick and easy access to websites—such as Google, Wikipedia, and YouTube—the availability and quality of web-based resources are becoming increasingly important evaluation factors. Different types of questions need to be asked when evaluating resource availability versus delivery, so it's helpful to think about them separately. Focusing on resource availability may be seen similarly to our suggested introduction of a level zero to Kirkpatrick, evaluating any informal learning that's happening socially or in the workplace. It's important to consider all available resources, not just those formally created within the organization.

Kaufman also replaces Kirkpatrick's measure of learner satisfaction with the learning experience, looking directly at learning resources and delivery themselves. It's helpful that Kaufman recognizes that, while input from learners is important when evaluating these elements, it's not the only source of data.

### Micro-level evaluation

The grouping of Kirkpatrick's Levels 2 and 3 is less helpful, as learning and job performance can and should be evaluated separately. While we can't see inside the learner's brain, good assessments and simulations can capture data about learning. We can then track job performance to evaluate whether that learning has been correctly applied in the workplace.

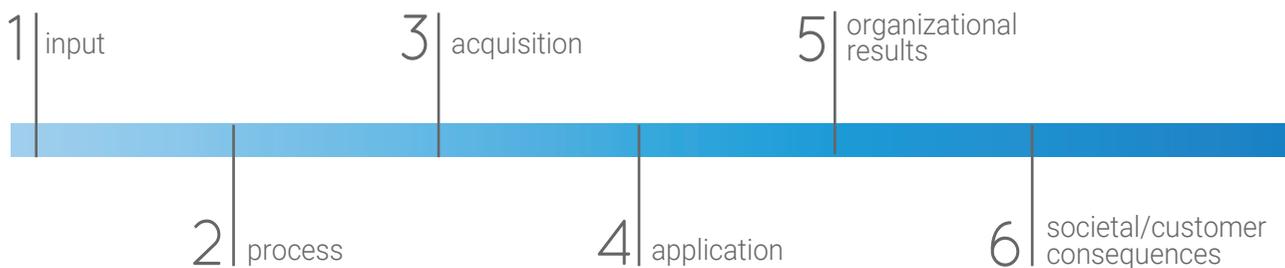
Having this evaluation data is important because it will determine the best way to resolve any issues. For example, the solutions to learners failing to apply their learning in the workplace are different from the solutions to learners failing to learn in the first place.

### Six levels?

In Kaufman's final presentation of his five levels of evaluation, he attempts to mirror Kirkpatrick's levels, presumably to cater to those familiar with Kirkpatrick. This results in Kaufman keeping input and process together as Levels 1a and 1b of his model. At the same time, he keeps Kirkpatrick's Levels 2 and 3 separate, but titles them both "micro-level." This attempt at continuity with Kirkpatrick is understandable, but confusing.

**Therefore, it may be more practical to think of Kaufman's model as having six levels and remove the mega/macro/micro terminology as illustrated in Figure 2.**

Fig 2. Six Levels of Kaufman



### Mega-level evaluation

Alongside the confusing terminology, the additional requirement to evaluate societal consequences and customer benefits make Kaufman's model less practical than Kirkpatrick's model. We might be able to gather some anecdotal evidence about societal and customer impacts, but getting robust data at such a high level is often not feasible. While it's helpful to consider the impact of learning on customers and society in some contexts, this evaluation often can be included in the business goal that the learning is expected to achieve.

For example, if the learning is expected to improve sales, more customers will benefit because they're using your wonderful product. It's not necessarily helpful to evaluate that customer benefit separately from achievement of the business goal, though. Even when the goal is something such as "improving customer satisfaction," it doesn't need to be seen as a separate level from business results.

### Just training

Kirkpatrick's original model was designed for formal training—not the wealth of learning experiences that happen in our organizations today. Kaufman's model is almost as restricted, aiming to be useful for "any organizational intervention" and ignoring the 90 percent of learning that's uninitiated by organizations. Further, it's hard to see how Kaufman's model is any better at tracking non-training interventions than Kirkpatrick's model.

In practice, Kirkpatrick is often applied in contexts outside of formal training. While the model was designed with formal training in mind, most L&D practitioners are pragmatic enough to reinterpret the model for their own particular contexts. We recommend this approach with any evaluation model; there will always be bits that work and bits that don't in any given context.

### Kaufman vs. Kirkpatrick (our opinion)

Kaufman's model provides some useful lessons that you can incorporate into your organization's learning evaluation strategy, but we don't recommend taking Kaufman's approach verbatim. In particular, the most helpful points are the division of resources from delivery and the move away from learner satisfaction. The least helpful facets are the addition of societal consequences and the overly complex terminology.



## Kaufman Summarized

- Kaufman's model builds on Kirkpatrick's model and mirrors its four levels.
- Kaufman splits Kirkpatrick's Level 1 into "input" and "process."
- Kaufman adds a fifth level, which evaluates the results for society and the customer.
- Kaufman positions his model as more practical than Kirkpatrick's model (we argue this isn't accurate in practice).

While numerous evaluation models offer variations on Kirkpatrick and provide useful recommendations, we can't explore them all in this whitepaper. Instead, we'll look at two alternative models that take completely different approaches to Kirkpatrick.



## Upcoming Publications

This is the second in a series of whitepapers covering learning evaluation theory. Subsequent installments in this series will explore other models of learning evaluation, emerging technologies that can support evaluation of learning, and a seven-step evaluation process that you can implement in your organization today.

## About the Author



Andrew Downes  
Learning & Interoperability,  
Watershed

With a background in instructional design and development, Andrew Downes has been creating learning content, experiences, and platforms in both corporate and academic worlds since 2010.

Now a consultant with Watershed LRS, Andrew is a leading thinker in Evidence Driven Learning Strategy and Learning Systems Interoperability. Andrew helps organizations to develop learning strategies based on evidence and evaluation, working with vendors to get at data from the products those organizations use.

One of the authors of the Tin Can/Experience API (xAPI) specification and much of the content on [tincanapi.com](http://tincanapi.com), Andrew has delivered numerous presentations, webinars and training sessions internationally. Andrew is well recognized as a reliable expert in the xAPI world.

### References:

Kaufman, R., Keller, J. and Watkins, R. (1996), What works and what doesn't: Evaluation beyond Kirkpatrick. *Nonprofit Management Leadership*, 35: 8-12. doi: 10.1002/pfi.4170350204

