



Creating Impact Reports that Senior Leaders Love

If you're like most learning and development professionals, one big challenge that makes you nervous is having to show the impact of training in a way that makes sense to senior executives in your company.

The good news: it's not as difficult as you might think. There is a simple, straightforward way to produce training impact reports that senior leaders love. Taking one step forward to do a little bit better than your organization is currently doing can make a huge difference.

If your CEO asked you to justify your L&D spending and prove the value of training, do you think you would be excited for the opportunity or somewhat terrified? Here's my story:

Soon after I started work at a Fortune 50 company, there was a big economic downturn. One of our senior leaders told me the first things he would cut were training budgets. I argued that our training programs were critical and shared stories and examples of why they were so important. He stopped me, put his hand up, and said, "Show me the data."

I had been with the organization for only a few months, so I went to my colleagues. They told me there was no data. I went from excited to terrified very quickly.



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About the Author

Jim Irvine is an HR/learning and development advocate with more than 35 years of industry experience. His style of partnering with clients is collaborative, thoughtful, detail oriented, and innovative, allowing others to see things from a different perspective.

This approach creates a forward-thinking, practical, results-driven experience. He challenges thinking and is diligent in creating solutions that impact the bottom line. He is successful with all levels of leadership due to his 25+ years developing global solutions at Fortune 100 companies.

My experience was not unique

This experience initiated my interest in collecting data using simple, quick methods so that I could effectively tell the story of how training impacted our employees and our organization.

From that time forward, my training budget grew and I never again faced losing it. Even during later downturns, we kept our training budgets. Why? Because senior leadership knew how critical training was for not only retaining high performers but also improving the behaviors that drove and sustained other important business metrics.

Research conducted by measurement expert Dr. Paul Leone of [MeasureUp Consulting](#) (and corroborated by ATD and others) shows that more than 90% of senior leaders want to see quantifiable results in learning and development training. But less than 10% of senior leaders are seeing these results.

That's a problem for us. Analyzing cost vs. benefit is a basic form of business decision-making. How do our senior leaders make decisions on purchasing equipment or new technologies? They look at cost vs. benefit ratios. They want to know how and when the organization will break even on each expenditure and when it will begin producing positive returns.

As learning and development professionals, we need to speak this same business language.

Better measurement does three things:

- It provides senior leaders with the information they need to make decisions.
- It produces larger, downturn-resistant training budgets.
- It gives us the data needed to tweak, adjust, or continuously improve programs to maximize their impact.

Why don't most organizations measure training impact?

According to Leone, "Most companies aren't measuring impact because either they don't know how, they don't have the time, or they are afraid the results will be negative. The first two issues stem from an overinflated belief of what an impact evaluation needs to look like. The third is an irrational fear based on lack of experience."

Leadership development training is one of the safest investments an organization can make because it has a multiplier effect. Any time we improve the skills of a leader, we simultaneously improve the work environment and performance of everyone who reports to that leader. More about this later.

Keeping and expanding budgets is about showing the value of what we do with the budgets we've already been given. The stewardship of existing budgets is critical.

Those who do a good job of measuring the impact of their training programs and communicating results develop a reputation for credibility with business leaders—because *they are speaking the same language* as the business leaders.

Most senior leadership teams are not looking for journal-quality impact studies. They just want to know they are investing their money and their employees' time in the right places and using resources well.



Five myths around measurement

Myth #1

I don't need a measurement study.

Truth: You need a study to build your reputation, keep your budgets, etc.

Myth #2

People intuitively understand the value of training and development.

Truth: Rarely does anyone outside of L&D naturally or intuitively connect a training event to behavior change, performance improvement, and business results. You need to show senior leaders why learning and development is important and how it is core to productivity, profitability, and other important measures.

Myth #3

If senior leaders aren't asking for an impact study, they aren't interested.

Truth: Even if they are not asking, you can bet they are thinking about it—or they soon will be when budgeting comes up again. If you want rock-solid existing and expanding future budgets, you have to measure impact and talk about it proactively.

Myth #4

I'll need to measure all programs or all participants—and that's hard to do.

Truth: Nope. It's best to start small in one business group and expand your approach as you get buy-in. Early in my career, I believed everyone must be measured or the data is not valid. That's not true. Think of manufacturing. In manufacturing, they don't quality test every product; they sample products off the line. We can use the same approach in testing the quality of our product and how effective that product is.

Myth #5

It's difficult—even impossible—to calculate ROI.

Truth: Although it can be challenging to calculate ROI, it's not impossible. In fact, in many cases, it is simpler than you expect. It takes a little discipline, but we all can do it.

Telling a better story

Most of us are familiar with Kirkpatrick's four levels of impact model:

- **Level 1: Reaction**
- **Level 2: Learning**
- **Level 3: Behavior Change**
- **Level 4: Business Impact**

Did they like it? Did they learn it? Was there behavior change? Did that behavior change impact the business in some meaningful way? If you can answer those four questions, you can tell a meaningful story. Sadly, most measurement efforts begin to dry up after Level 1.

While 90% of learning professionals measure Level 1, less than 20% measure Levels 3 or 4. But behavior change and business impact are where you need to focus your efforts if you want to answer the questions that are top of mind for senior leaders, namely:

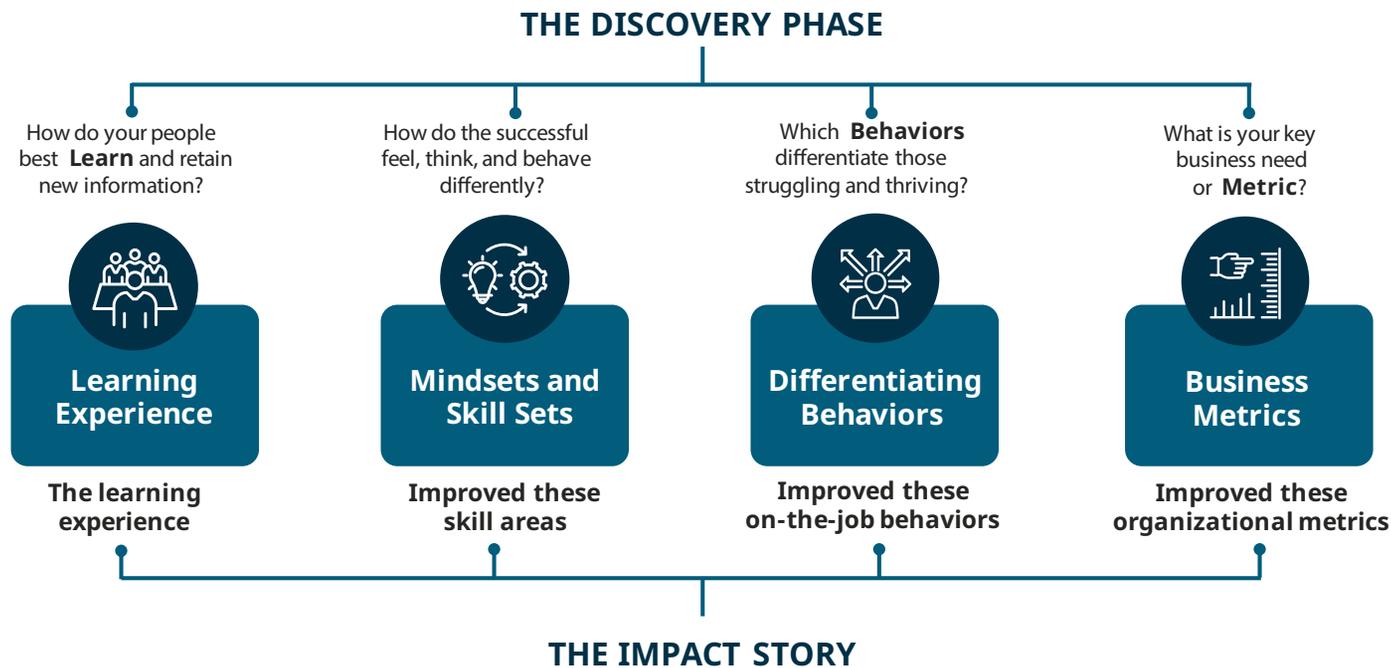
- **What are we trying to change in our business?**
- **What is the business need?**
- **What is the key metric we are trying to drive?**



Start with the end in mind

Just like instructional designers, we need to reverse-engineer the measurement to get data that senior leaders need. We need to start at Level 4 (Business Impact) and work our way backward. This communicates to senior leadership: “We built this training program to teach these mindsets and skill sets, because they are the behaviors that differentiate our average performers from our high performers. And our average and high performers are impacting the business in this way.”

Here is what this looks like graphically.

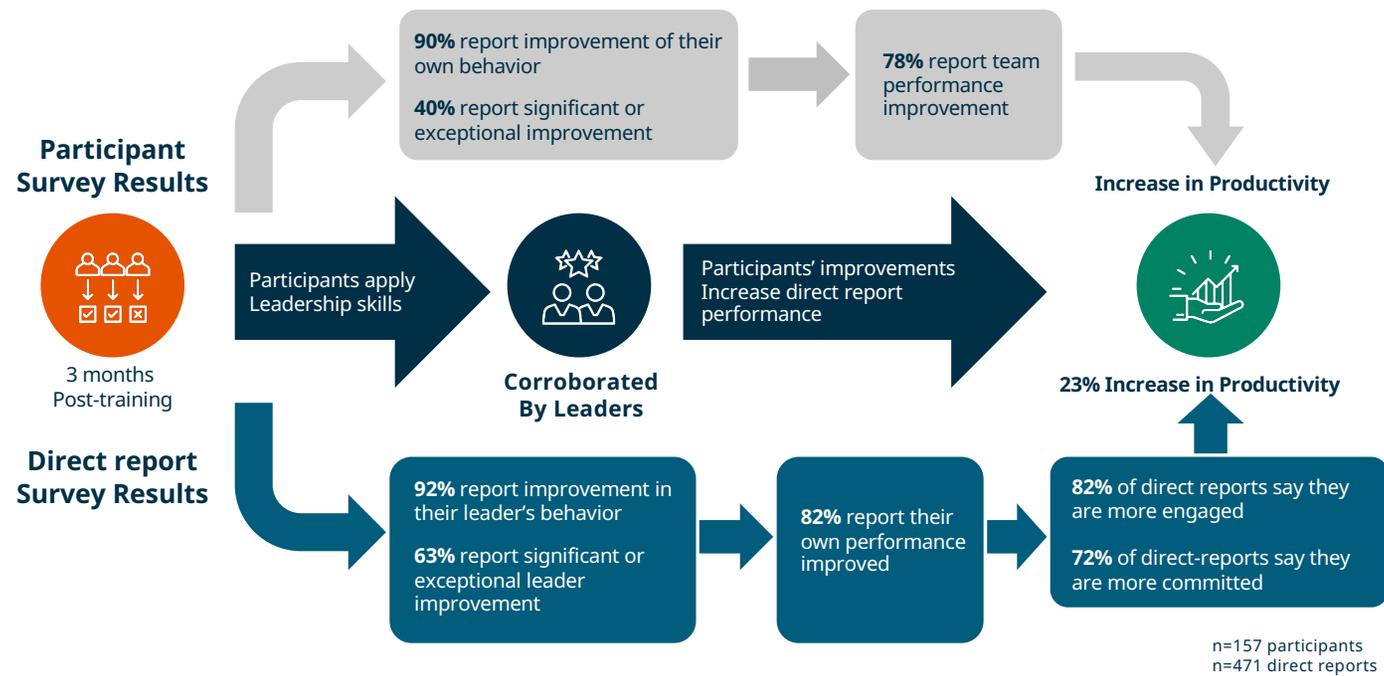


When we are identifying these differentiating behaviors, we are looking for the mindsets and skill sets that precede them. We want to enhance how leaders participating in our learning experiences think and behave. These skills drive the job behavior change and influence organizational metrics. It’s a simple, straightforward way to tell the story we need to tell to senior leaders.

Capturing the data

All of this data can be captured using a two-step survey process. The first survey is conducted at the end of the class. The second survey is conducted after approximately 90 days have passed. The results are impressive.

This graphic shows how much data can result from just two surveys. These are sample results from a Level 1-4 Measurement Impact Report on a recent SLII® training. Wouldn't you enjoy reporting these results to your senior leaders?



Survey #1: Capturing Level 1 and Level 2 data

At Blanchard, we combine Level 1 and Level 2 questions into an end-of-course evaluation. We do the pre and the post all at one time—a pre-training/post-training retrospective approach. In this, we ask “Now that you’ve been through the class, how would you rate your knowledge and confidence before training and after training?”

We recommend this approach for four reasons:

- Now that people have been through the workshop, they have a better sense of what good looks like.
- It is more efficient to collect pre and post data at the same time than to conduct two separate surveys for these questions.
- People answer more honestly and accurately with this format.
- We’ve found that what often keeps someone from applying what they learn is either a lack of knowledge or lack of confidence, so asking directly about participant knowledge and confidence is important.

To limit the time involved in completing the survey to between two and three minutes.

We include key questions senior leaders want to know, such as:

- Was the training relevant to your role?
- Do you think it will impact your performance on your job?
- How would you rate your overall satisfaction?
- Do you believe this training will increase your performance back on the job?

We also include some fill-in-the-blank statements and open-ended questions such as:

- The most valuable part of the program was ___.
- The least valuable part of the program was ___.
- What is ONE key takeaway that you are excited to apply immediately?
- What barriers might prevent you from putting this learning into practice within your work group?
(If results from different classes show a common barrier, it can be dealt with.)

Also:

- Would you recommend this training to colleagues?
(For this, we use a binary “yes” or “no.” We don’t use an eleven-point net promoter scale because it is difficult to explain to senior leaders.)

Survey #2: Measuring Levels 3 and 4

With the second survey, we look at Levels 3 and 4. Keep in mind the first step in becoming great at measurement is dialing in your Level 1 and Level 2 surveys. Once you're solid there, you can move to Levels 3 and 4.

This is where most people want to improve. Level 3 is about behavior change and Level 4 measures how behavior change may have impacted some important business metric. With leadership training assessments, we send a post-training survey to the participants as well as the participants' direct reports approximately 90 days after the training.

We ask participants *Did you acquire new, valuable knowledge and experience in this training program? Were you able to apply it over the last two to three months?* We ask direct reports the same questions, worded slightly differently.

We follow up by asking participants *Did applying these behaviors improve your team's performance?* And we ask direct reports *Did anything your leader applied improve your own performance in some way?* Here we use an open text field so direct reports can tell a story.

We ask participants to estimate how much the training improved their team's performance and we ask direct reports to estimate how much the training improved their own performance.

Finally, we ask both participants and direct reports *Did the training increase engagement?* and *Did training increase organizational commitment?* This is a very short survey that targets only these areas.



Comparing data among participants and their direct reports

When we teach somebody to be a better leader, whose life is that going to impact? Typically, it's the direct report. So the direct report is in the best position to know whether their boss improved on leadership behaviors.

The good news is that we almost always find that the direct reports estimate a greater training impact and a greater behavioral improvement than do the participants. This is powerful and surprising data to show your senior leaders, because they expect the opposite.

It is especially powerful when we show the data regarding these questions: *Was the participant more engaged as a result of the training? Was the participant more committed to staying at the organization as a result of the training? Were the direct reports more engaged as a result of anything their leader improved? Are they more committed to staying with the organization as a result of anything their leader improved?*

Again, the direct reports' data is almost always more affirmative than the participants' data. We remind the senior leaders that we didn't train the direct reports—the multiplier effect causes this response. So if the average participant has eight direct reports, a total of nine people are being positively impacted by that training.

When you train leaders, you change the work environment of the people reporting to those leaders. People react to and benefit from the new mindsets and skill sets their leaders learn with greater performance and productivity.



Dealing with Level 5 measurement requests

Sometimes, a senior executive will specifically ask for the ROI of a training initiative. If this occurs, it's important to remember that less than 5% of organizations ever reach this level of measurement and it's generally not required to show the impact of training initiatives.

This calculation is dependent on an organization having determined the financial impact that behavior change will have on existing individual and/or organizational metrics. Most organizations don't have those numbers.

If your organization does have those numbers, an ROI calculation can generate the number you need. If your organization is not collecting that data, you will need to include additional time and expense to monetize behavioral outcomes. If this is required, consider partnering with an outside measurement expert to ensure use of best practices.

Fortunately, in our experience, when most senior leaders are asking about ROI, they are actually looking for the story of impact and not the mathematical calculation of ROI. They typically want evidence that the money spent on training improved key behaviors and positively impacted desired outcomes. Presenting data for Levels 1-4 in the format we have described provides that evidence. Become skilled and confident in measuring Levels 1-4 behavior change, and leave Level 5 measurement for when and if it is specifically requested.



Identifying Level 6 climate factors

The last set of questions we ask has to do with Dr. Paul Leone's climate factors that either help or hinder the transfer of learning and sustainability. We ask the participants *How would you rate the support and guidance received from your immediate manager?*

A climate factor question identifies what made the transfer of learning better and what made it worse. Paul Leone's research identifies both people and organizational climate factors. For example: *Did my manager endorse the training? Did they meet with me after the training? Do they praise and recognize me for new behaviors or do they act like the training was a waste of time? Do my coworkers encourage the new behaviors or do they downplay those new behaviors?*

These factors have a huge impact on the success of a training program. You can learn more about Dr. Leone's approach to measuring the impact of training in his book, *Measuring and Maximizing Training Impact: Bridging the Gap between Training and Business Results*.

At Blanchard, we collect that data, run the numbers, and show the results that compare the group with high manager support to the group with low manager support. We typically find high manager support produces a much higher ROI than low manager support does. This shows that the process of training is not just about developing and delivering a great training program, it's about the environment the participant goes back to and the role environment plays on sustainability and transfer of learning.



Here's the bottom line

Most organizations are not measuring the impact of people's training because they don't know how, they don't have the time, or they are afraid the results might be negative.

Hopefully, this paper has addressed these concerns. We've shown you how to collect data across different levels in a post-training survey and how to present the data in a way that effectively communicates the value of training.

If Blanchard can help you with additional information on measuring the impact of your next leadership development initiative, or help you get started on your measurement journey, please contact us. Get confident and competent in this approach and you'll gain credibility. That's how you'll keep and build your budgets!



Blanchard® is a global leader in leadership development, consulting, and coaching. For more than 40 years, Blanchard has partnered with organizations to maximize individual achievement and organizational performance – bringing measurable progress and true transformation. Blanchard’s SLII® is the global leadership model of choice, powering inspired leaders for more than 10,000 organizations worldwide. Blanchard also offers a suite of award-winning solutions through flexible delivery modalities to meet the specific needs of clients and learners.



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