



The Challenge to Measure Social-Emotional Learning

Behavior Ratings and the Stage Model Approach

Complementary Approaches: Overview

Behavior Rating Scales

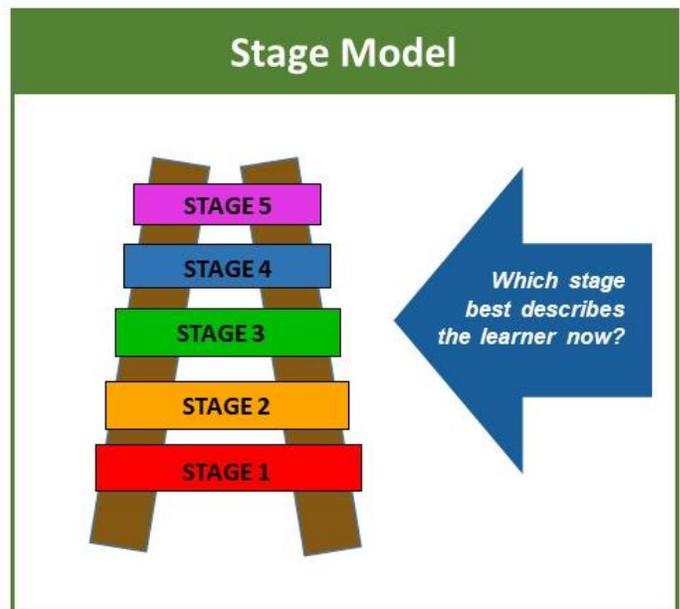
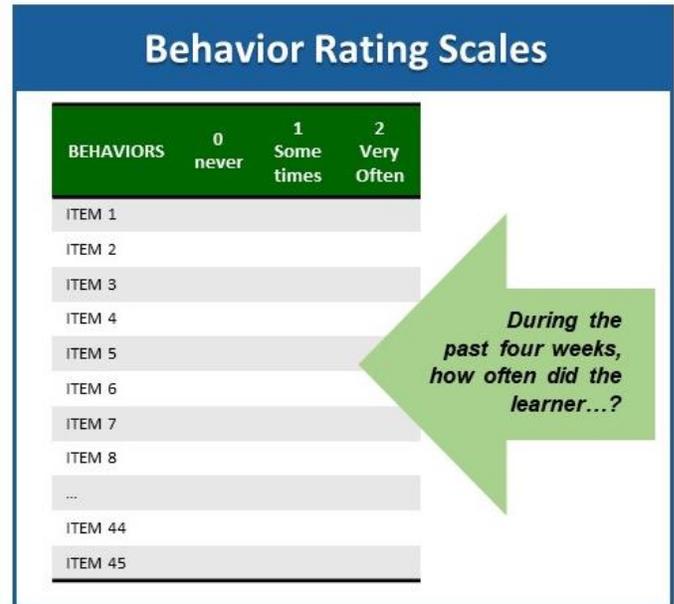
The behavior rating scale is the widely used method for collecting SEL (Social-Emotional Learning) data. How does it work? An informed observer or self-assessing learner reviews a series of behavioral items and rates how frequently, how true, or well these behaviors are being exercised. The appropriate rating is selected using the range provided on a scale. It is valuable to quantify the degree to which program participants have these skills and are able to apply them effectively. Learners can then be sorted (stronger to weaker) in aggregate, by skill.

This type of survey tool typically has 50 or more items and delivers numerical tallies. Learners are assessed uniformly. Behavior rating scales place the focus on specific skills which are considered essential for academic and life success. Designed for standardization, there is limited to no customization.

Stage Models

In contrast to the quantity of skill-building captured by behavior ratings, stage models focus on transformations: shifts in competency measured across a range of growth factors (such as aptitude with new skills, comfort with self, and interpersonal relationships). An informed observer or self-assessing learner references a results ladder and selects the stage that best describes the learner. The ladder stages (and graduated levels that may be inserted between each stage) are customized in alignment with program mission, invariably helping program leaders clarify expected results.

“Quantum leaps” are named, owned and can be celebrated, as higher-stage performance becomes normalized. The approach provides a shared framework for leaders and learners to chart goals, execute good practice, and assess gains, in awareness of the program’s “north star” intended benefits. The assessment process is invariably a powerful enrichment to program delivery by triggering in learners a psychoactive drive to evolve into their next stage of potential.



Relative Advantages of the Two Approaches

Standardized Behavior Rating provides tallies of how well a range of practices is each being performed at selected time intervals.

This approach lends itself to:

- Summary profiles of specific skill mastery, with statistics per learner and cohort,
- Identification of individuals in need of remediation,
- Local and national comparisons across similar programs,
- Generating lots of data!

Stage Models provide tallies of the stages reached on each competency ladder at selected time intervals.

This approach lends itself to:

- Summary profiles on stages reached, with statistics per learner and cohort,
- Identification of opportunities to support individuals at every stage,
- Adding narratives for a rich blend of numbers and stories,
- Utilizing the growing body of SEL research and training materials to inform curricula and ensure delivery of the essential “building blocks” for school and life success, and
- Less is more: minimizes data collection (less), and brings to light what is vital to each program (more).

What is Lost through the Standardized Approach

CONTEXT: For programs using the standardized approach, what is lost is the “social emotional competence” of the individual youth in the learning environment. Learners are treated as data points. Their stories, struggles, kindness to peers, and heroism remain invisible, hence, undervalued.

SECRET SAUCE: Standardized instruments do not distinguish nuances in student populations, program philosophies, nor dosage strength. A program with a specific strategy and culture for impacting large numbers of diverse youth will gain little from comparing behavior ratings against programs that only tangentially touch on this strategy and culture.

As an example, an urban, school-based, intensive trauma-therapy program serving 30 LGBT youth of color will learn little from comparing their average score of 3.7 on 50 items against an average rating of 3.4 statewide for school-based programs of all shapes, sizes, geographies and missions.

DEPTH: Summarizing a battery of brief response items—without supporting narratives—lacks meaning for investors, and falls short of conveying the emotional wallop that program leaders experience daily as they witness life-changing results firsthand.

Frequently Asked Questions about the Stage Model

What is the time burden on those making the assessments?

The stage model approach typically is the more time-efficient option (only one rating per ladder, plus brief summary narrative), as contrasted with 50 or more items to assess using behavior rating scales. While vastly fewer in number, stage model ratings do demand deeper reflection. Rather than quickly reading item after item and clicking the best-matching rating for behavior observed, the assessor needs to consider the stage descriptions, and choose the ladder rung that best describes the participant most of the time.

Which approach will better distinguish the value of our program?

Behavior rating delivers numerical findings, allowing gross-level comparison. For example, we learn that Sarah is performing at the 67th percentile, which is low among her classmates, and higher than the statewide average. As well, we uncover specific practices on which Sarah is underperforming in comparison to her peers.

In contrast, responses to the stage model reveal the distinctive competence of each learner and each program. We learn, for example, that Sarah, at stage three, has adjusted to the environment and become actively engaged. She shows consistent drive to accomplish, speaks with assurance and expresses ownership as part of the community. The stage model further reveals what's next for Sarah, and guides program staff to nudge Sarah to take stock of her personal gains, try new ways of doing things, and step into more of a leadership role, assisting her peers to thrive. The stage model guides Sarah to celebrate what she has achieved and adopt new practices to propel her progress. The report on Sarah's cohort shows how the group as a whole is distributed across the stages at various points in the learning experience. Cross-program comparisons are of less interest with the secret sauce of Sarah's program in the spotlight.

Are we better served by studying discrete skill-building or holistic development?

With the behavior rating approach, growth is measured in terms of what has become *better*. There is no consideration of emergent opportunities. In contrast, with the stage model approach, the intent is less to capture each improved skill and more to understand how participants are becoming *different*. The stage model assessment process is used to identify and communicate among both leaders and learners the larger context of possibilities and next-stage stretch in performance. Taking stock of gains invariably accelerates higher levels of advanced practice.

For reports, do we need the snapshot or landscape view of results?

Using behavior rating scales, the assessor narrows the scope of observation to focus on one specific skill at a time, recall when the participant has been observed practicing or avoiding that skill, make an informed judgement using a rating scale, and then move on to the next isolated skill. Using stage model assessments, trainers observe the "whole person" moving through the program experience, noting responses to the full range of opportunities and challenges presented. This captures the whole of all the capacities exhibited in concert (the harmony in Sarah, her peers and their movement together as a cohort). Which type of finding matters more to your investors and the audiences for your reports? In our experience at SEED Impact, we find that investors value evidence of whole-life change that sticks.

Conclusion: Why Not Draw on the Strengths of Both Approaches?

Utilizing both approaches, results can be combined to:

- strengthen the validity and reliability of each approach,
- enrich learner feedback,
- guide programming,
- heighten program experience, and
- accelerate growth in social emotional learning.

For further information:

- ➔ **Standardized Behavior Rating:** A variety of time-tested, digitally advanced technologies can be considered in selecting a high-quality, behavior rating evaluation. A December 2017 report prepared by American Institutes for Research provides a [broad-sweeping survey of key SEL measures and indicators](#). Included is a table summarizing 136 different social emotional frameworks.
- ➔ **Stage Model:** Learning together with a range of diverse social programs, SEED Impact has developed a surprisingly [simple, efficient and cost-effective stage-model tool](#) for measuring SEL and reporting social impact. We welcome opportunities to partner, to learn and serve more programs.

Contact: possibilities@seedimpact.org

