

***“Are you ready to apply... The ‘Baldrige Process’?”
“Why would I do that to myself?”***

Following the Baldrige Discipline

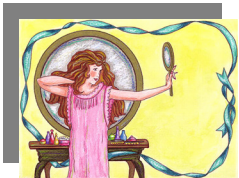
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What do people mean when they say they are “using Baldrige” or “using the criteria?” How do you use criteria that do not tell you what to do to run your organization? The Baldrige criteria document is not an instruction book of specific things to do, like so many of our modern improvement initiatives. Rather it is designed to lead you to self-discovery by asking a series of carefully planned questions. But not even the self-assessment process using these questions is “using the criteria.” Applying for a state or national quality award is not “using the criteria” – although, this is a strong driver towards using it. So let’s conclude that by merely answering the criteria questions and doing a self-assessment or applying for a quality award is not “using the criteria!”

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Now before all that under-your-breath mumbling gets too out of control, let’s talk about what is “using the criteria.” Using the criteria is all about having a disciplined approach for developing your organization. The Baldrige process is all about using discipline to accelerate the improvement of your organization – from top to bottom. With this understanding, it is just not an acceptable excuse for an organization to say, “We are not ready to apply to an award program.” It’s actually the application process that gets you ready to apply. The process helps an organization isolate the different parts of their system, analyze them, and then pull them back together to analyze them as a whole. It is truly a discipline.



This discipline causes organizations to annually look in the mirror, identify the “warts,” and plan how to remove them. The discipline drives you to accelerate your improvement because of the competitiveness it inspires and the deadlines imposed (everything has a due date that keeps you moving and you have action plans for improvement to be complete before writing the next application). It is important to understand that this is an annual process. It should be THE kickoff of your performance excellence cycle. The activity should drive strategic planning since it gives you the “current state” of your organization. It should kick off your annual improvement efforts. This process is a GREAT answer to the criteria questions about how you evaluate and improve systems. You write an application that

reveals your gaps; you prioritize them, create corresponding action plans, and then go address them. The reason I call this a discipline is because it must override all excuses – no matter what.

You might say, “I’m not ready to apply. There are some very basic things that I DON’T have in place.” It’s more important at this point in your development to apply at least to a state or local award program and have an external review. An external reviewer can help you identify the linkages you should consider when closing those basic gaps. For instance, if you don’t have a strategic



planning process, that in itself is a very big gap. Right? But an external examiner may identify that in addition to not having a strategic planning process, you really haven’t identified your core competencies or your key customers, which are pretty important in being able to do a good job planning. If you work on closing your gaps in a vacuum, you will likely have disjointed activities and need to modify them later when you do get that feedback.

You also are apt to say, “I’m going to stay out a year so I can work on my gaps.” This is usually a big mistake – sometimes one that you can’t do anything about. But this almost always results in 1) staying out longer than one year, 2) getting much further behind (because you never really have time to work on those gaps and if you don’t have the discipline driving you to a deadline, then you might continue postponing), and 3) sending a “message” to employees that this is a *program* not a way of doing business, thus it is a lower priority.

The investment in this process is at many levels. It starts with writing the application. The first time is the hardest, as with almost any new venture. Each subsequent writing is a matter of updating the existing application to reflect changes in the organization and/or the criteria. Your first writing effort is very time intensive and mentally taxing. To say everything you need to say about your organization in 50 pages is very, very difficult - especially in such a way as to be able to demonstrate goodness without being a braggart. Your subsequent application will be a lot less time consuming once you get this first one done. Then, the year when the criteria go through its two-year cycle of significant change, a bit more time will need to be invested, but certainly not as much as the first one.



Employees need to know what's going on, but they all don't need to be involved in the application writing process. It's very important for employees to know what you are doing. If you don't tell them, then they will "know" you are doing it just for some award. Another level of investment is in taking the results of the writing effort and creating your annual performance excellence roadmap – your action plans for improvement. Out of the writing process comes a pseudo-feedback report that we prepare. You and we reveal the areas that you really had trouble discussing rather than what the examiners will find. This is the raw truth that examiners may not see. Therefore, it is an important document to drive your improvement.

Your goal **every year** should be to get a site visit. This is so, so, so important to you and your organization. There is a magic that occurs when a group gets a site visit. Everyone bands together, they begin to look above the chaff of their everyday problems to realize just how excellent the organization is. They become a powerful force to propel the organization forward in improvements that you would have never dreamed possible. Hard to describe - but it's a very real phenomena. We see it time after time. In preparation for a site visit, there are additional things you should do, like having someone independent come out to talk to folks to help build momentum. It's not about coaching people how to answer questions, but about helping people understand what they know. Most folks do things because that is what they do. It's what the organization requires. They never really make the connection that the reason they do it is to tie into a bigger picture. *Once they "get it" they will do their jobs better, they will have better attitudes, and will be stronger contributors to the organization's success.*



When you get your feedback report, get help interpreting it. Many organizations get upset because they are offended by one or two things they don't think are true, and label the entire feedback report as balderdash and set it aside, throwing the baby out with the bath water. A trained examiner can help you understand the subtleties of the feedback report to allow you to make the best use of it, especially in helping you link this feedback to your other audits/examinations. For instance, the Baldrige feedback report and what you do with it is a great contribution to your continuous improvement approach for ISO. In Education and Healthcare, the Baldrige feedback process can contribute heavily to meet the requirements of your Accreditation bodies. This is the real value of the process – external feedback to help you grow and link your system together. The problem is, it is hard to

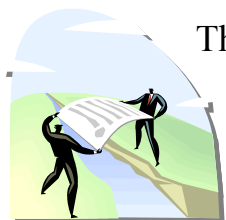


understand this whole thing about systems, and until you do, you are likely to implement isolated improvements that are not connected to the rest of the system. Your opportunities for improvement are best used as input to strategic or operational planning and run through this system rather than creating another system to address just this feedback.

The Baldrige journey is a multi-year journey – but how many years is up to you. Because of the very nature of the program, there are two years at the start with potentially small payback. You want to try to recapture those by getting help to understand the process. Unless you’ve been associated with the criteria and the process intimately for a few years, the first year you write an application you are just trying to figure out what the criteria is asking. Do yourself a favor; find an expert in the criteria – a *seasoned* examiner who can walk you through it for your specific organization – perhaps through a workshop like our *Systems Thinking for Leaders (ST4L)*. If you don’t get this right, your feedback for that year is rather poor because they are only telling you that you didn’t answer the question! The second year is when an applicant figures out the criteria but finds many areas they think they have major gaps. Their writing can’t help but reflect that. This is what we address. Bruce and I build and “edit” applications very, very well (some call it "spin", but it is simply how you say and rationalize things). We translate what you write into a format and language examiners will understand based on their training and experience and in response to the criteria questions. *You don’t have to do things the same way as everyone else – do what is right for you.* Again, the use of an external expert during the first year can help you understand yourself and your needs in a new light and cut precious time off your learning curve for your performance excellence journey.

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Get an external or internal coach; someone who takes the time regularly to “guilt” you into doing the improvements you planned. Use someone who will not let you put off developing an application one year while you “work on your gaps;” someone who will not let you focus on the meaningless issues that people use to sabotage the effort, but who will help you focus on your future.



The journey is a paradigm shift. It’s not just about changing the organization to do things differently, but a great deal of it is about reframing how you view yourself and how you define excellence. With the right mindset, the mindset that there is no “the answer,” you’ll realize that those perceived gaps you identified during the

application writing process are not all gaps after all. Some of them are business choices. And those that are gaps can be quickly addressed for the most part, thus written about in the application. Some people call this “spin,” but it’s not. It’s gaining new perspective and insight to the operation of your organization and the business environment that you work within.

Using the Baldrige criteria has, as its foundation, the idea of *pride*. As pride grows, so does support and so does excellence. Tell employees what you are doing because you are proud of them. They will, in turn, be proud of the organization. The investment in a "drop-dead gorgeous" application cannot be overstated! It too builds pride because you are showing yourself in the best possible light. You can get the examiners comfortable from the very beginning with a good-looking application. It tells them that you have spent as much time on them as they are about to spend on you. You have then won a friend. They are more likely to believe what you say and give you benefit of the doubt. Another reason for a “shining” application is that you will only understand how useful the document is once you get a hold of it. Most groups I know use it as a public relations document, a business plan for the bank, a descriptive document for suppliers and partners, and/or as a wonderful orientation document for their employees.

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Annoying though it may be at first, it’s an important maturity point to begin caring how you can prove that you do things well. This is always an issue with applicants. *Why do I need to keep minutes to prove to someone outside who was in a meeting? Why would I keep a presentation I did two years ago to employees to introduce strategic direction just to show I did it?* Some measurements fall into this category as well because they may not be important to running your organization, but they are important to show others who you are and what you are doing. When an organization realizes that the performance excellence journey carries a responsibility to be a *role model* when they are recognized, then they also begin to accelerate their improvement. They are beginning to THINK like a winner, and will then ACT like a winner, and ultimately **BE A WINNER!**

