

Board of Directors

Dale Crownover
Chair



Recently I was honored by a request to deliver the commencement address to the spring graduating class at LeTourneau University. I thought I would share with you my message to the graduates. If nothing else, I am living proof that the Baldrige Criteria for Performance Excellence works. I'm not shy about taking every opportunity to explain to people why.

Thank you for that wonderful introduction. It makes me sound smarter than I am, and reminds me of how humble and proud I am to be here with you today.

It took me longer than you to get here. In fact, I was 45 before I received my degree from this wonderful institution and I'm just as proud of it as you are.

Before I received my degree, I was already a successful businessman and I was lucky. I was lucky because I always had relatively good common sense and the ability to learn from others. I learned in my early years that you are who you hang with, so I was always pretty selective who I chose to be with. Hanging out with good, smart people enabled me to ask them a lot of questions and to learn from them.

When I was asked to give this address I was first stunned, then honored. This is like a dream come true because I have so much admiration for this institution.

But like so many things I have been confronted with, before I decided to come here I wanted to make sure in my heart I would be able to meet your needs here today.

I did some research: What do other speakers say in this type situation? Most commencement addresses make references to following your dreams, your passion in life. Saying that you must love what you do to excel.

Those are appropriate and noble messages, but the key piece of missing information as I see it is some guidance on how best to pursue your dream, that passion in life. It's sometimes easy to come up with what you want to do. The how is the challenge.

As you go around receiving congratulations today, a lot of people will ask, “What do you want to do now that you have graduated?”

You will notice that you will get a lot of advice on “what” to do. But, very few folks will be able to offer you specific advice on “how” to achieve the “what” they think you should do. You need something to guide you in that. I know I did.

Some years ago, when our family-owned small business, Texas Nameplate, was on the verge of bankruptcy, I knew what we needed to do. Common sense told me we had to have better customer relations, employee relations, more market share and better cash flow. What I did not know was how to do these basic things. As has always been my way, I realized the best way to find out how, was to ask questions.

Through my investigation, I found a management system called the Baldrige criteria.

I enjoyed the fact that it too was full of questions about how to make an organization successful. Somebody much smarter than me created the questions; all I had to do is try to find the correct answers.

This has really been the secret of my success in life at all levels – finding the right questions and then finding the right answers. I did not always have the right answers myself, but I learned that if I hung around the right people, they would help me get to the right answers.

So, this Baldrige management system that had questions as guidelines was perfect for my business crisis.

I eventually found that the Baldrige criteria with its probing questions that drive business success had much broader application. I’ll explain what I mean by showing how some of the Baldrige terminology applies to us as individuals.

There’s a song out called “What about me?” It’s OK to think and talk about us as individuals. We need to understand who we are and what we are.

So, let’s talk about you. Let’s imagine you personally, as you live your life, are a business. On the front of your business is your name, followed by the word Company Inc.

Since it is your company, you can imagine you are the CEO.

The Baldrige criteria helps us be successful because it organizes a lot of very important questions.

First is leadership. Now in your life, who is part of your leadership team? What is your vision? What is your mission? What are your core values? What is your purpose? How will you communicate to others? These are important questions as you go out into the world.

Next is planning. Do you have a plan for your life? Yes or no? If you don’t, you should prepare one. If you do, does your life plan include short-term as well as long-term objectives? Do you have action plans on how to accomplish your goals a year from now? How about action plans for 20 years from

now? How do you communicate these action plans and to whom do you communicate? Do you use your plan consistently? If I did not plan my life or my business, I would surely fail.

No matter what you decide to do, your labor needs to create value that someone is willing to pay for in some way. The Baldrige system calls these “customers.” What about your customers? Who and how do you satisfy them? Could it be your parents, your family members, your preacher and your spouse? Are they happy with the choices you are making in life? Are they happy in their relationship with you? Are you happy with their choices? If not, are you willing to do something about it? In life, as in business, a happy customer is loyal to you consistently over time.

Who are you going to emulate; who is your role model in life? Could it be Tiger Woods, your granddad, Jesus? In my business, I benchmark against the very best, those I want to be like. In life, we must choose people of integrity and work to live up to their standards.

What about your employees? Who and how do you satisfy them? Could it be your friends, your next-door neighbor and your fellow workers? Perhaps people you know and work with in church or even those you do not know but have an impact on. Are they happy with the choices you are making in life and how you treat them? Are you happy with their choices? If not, are you willing to do something about it? As Christians, we believe in service to our fellow man. We must treat others as we would want to be treated.

OK. We have asked the right questions about leadership, about plans, about customers, about benchmarking with other successful people and about employees. To make our framework complete, we need a way to deliver the “value” that will earn us success. We need a process.

What about your processes? How are you going to accomplish what you know you need to do? Are your aspirations in life ad hoc or do you document and hold yourself accountable? How and what will you measure? Are you interested in trends? Positive results? Sustainability? Having a plan and measuring yourself against your plan will serve you as an individual as it has served me in my business.

Before trying to answer all these questions, I suggest you consider four things.

1. What is your approach? What do you really want to accomplish after you leave here? How will you implement the answers to the questions we have just asked?
2. Do you fully understand what you're trying to do? That's a difficult question at this point in your life. It may change. But, as you change your vision, you must continuously change your plans.
3. How will you deploy your plans for the success of your company – YOU? Execution of these life plans and actions take time. Will you have the patience to change plans as life sends you down different roads?
4. How will you measure your results? Will you set goals and benchmark yourself with the best?

Now consider again all these things that I said are important to live well, you as a leader of your own life, your plan for your life, your parents and friends being satisfied with you as an individual, your

role model and the processes you will follow to be successful.

Is there balance among these different things? Do you tend to value or work on one more than the other? Do you think one is more important than another?

Do you align them appropriately to ensure your success as a good person?

Do you integrate them all into the enterprise that is YOU? Do you seek input from parents, friends, church and integrate these with your goals in life?

In these questions and concepts, I have just laid out to you the Baldrige criteria for excellence in business. This was the exact process I followed when our company was near closure. It helped me develop a strong business and it serves me equally well to be a better person.

To be successful in life, as in business, you don't have to be smart. You just have to find and answer the right questions. The answers you seek will lead you to the right people.

I know you will find, as I did, the most important thing is having good relationships with good people. If you show them you mean well, they will open their hearts and help you.

I'll leave you with these additional thoughts that have guided my way through life....

Be humble. Don't tell people who you are, show them who you are.

Have a relationship with the Lord; you will be tested. If he shows up for dinner, will you feel comfortable that you have followed his guidance?

Try to do something, rather than be something.

It's OK to make mistakes or make bad decisions; just be willing to accept the consequences and never do it again that way.

Life is full of disappointments; God intended it to test us. As a good person, you can overcome anything.

You will come to many forks in the road; take one. Being willing to make a decision is difficult for many because of the fear of being wrong. You will never be right unless you make a decision.

You don't always have to agree with what's happening in your life, but you do have to accept it and move on.

Enjoy your own company – be proud of who you are. If you don't like yourself, it may be difficult for others as well.

In life, God will not grab your hand unless you reach out. Never be ashamed of what you believe, but don't impose it on others.

Ask for and accept advice for improvement; it's the best and easiest way to get better in life.

Never lie. God ensures that you can only remember the truth. You have to live with yourself.

I have been asked by many people all over the world, which books I have read. How I learned what I have. I tell them I learned leadership from Abraham Lincoln, continuous improvement from a book called "The Goal" and many more books on quality. But the one book that sums up all I have done is the Bible. From it, I learned to love God and serve my fellow men.

I recommend it to instill integrity, respect, honesty and love in everything you do.

I'll end with a little story.

There was a young father of twin sons – one an optimist and the other boy a pessimist. On their birthday, while the two boys were at school, the young father filled the room of the pessimist with toys.

The optimist's room he filled with manure.

When the boys got home from school, they immediately went to their respective rooms. The father later went upstairs to them.

The pessimist, with all his toys, was crying out loud. The father asked, "Why are you crying? You have all these neat toys to play with." The little boy said he was crying because he did not know where he was going to put them all. He said that he was concerned because his friends might become jealous. He also was upset because he was going to have to spend a lot of money on batteries for many of them to work.

Finally, the father went down the hall to the optimist's room where he heard his other son laughing and singing out loud, shoveling through all the manure.

The father asked him, "Why are you so happy shoveling through all this manure?" The boy responded, "Dad, with this much manure, there is bound to be a pony in here somewhere!"

I apologize for any of you out there who were not lucky enough to be born and raised a Texan, but you did graduate from a university located here in Texas.

So, congratulations on your accomplishments here today and get out there and find your pony!