

Implementing the Baldrige Criteria; What about the Employees?



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When I began to consider my doctoral dissertation, I knew that my passion was firmly planted in the Baldrige criteria. It is a framework that made sense to me. I could see how it would be useful to organizations, how it impacted performance and how much work it must be to put into action. The articles and other publications I read about the Baldrige criteria were numerous and varied. Most focused on explaining the criteria, discussed how it can be implemented or presented performance improvements realized at the organizational level. While each of these is obviously important, one area appeared to have been less explored in Baldrige organizations: the impact on employees.

Numerous studies have shown that the employees of any organization implementing the criteria are a key, if not critical, aspect of the process. The implementation process itself can include substantial changes in how work is done; work that employees are doing. Any time we evaluate what we do, or are asked to consider other ways of doing our work, we are learning. Given this, what then are these employees learning from participating in implementing the Baldrige criteria? I had my dissertation topic.

Workplace learning happens in both formal (classroom-type) and informal (while doing work) settings. Learning occurring in classroom-type, formal settings can be measured and readily identified through learning objectives or evaluations by participants. But what about learning occurring informally as employees do work? What are employees in organizations implementing the Baldrige criteria learning by just doing their daily work under a new framework? With the cooperation of TAPE recipient St. Joseph Health System located in Bryan Texas, I was able to answer my question.

With no prior studies on the topic, I asked the employees I interviewed broad, open-ended questions. Simply, the main question I posed was “what do you feel you have learned informally through participating in the implementation of the Baldrige criteria in your organization.” What I discovered from interviewing employees at various hierarchical and functional areas is incredible.

Seven themes emerged from these interviews. I describe these as:

1. The power of focus
2. Processes, processes, processes and measurement
3. I'm good with change
4. The organization is a system with a plan and I can contribute

5. Leadership: The organization's and my own
6. Communication: Inside, outside, up and down
7. I am learning to stretch

One of the most prominent themes found among these employees was that they had learned the importance of having a clear direction; a focus that guides them as employees. Some indicated that they referred to the Baldrige criteria when questioning how something should be done while others described being more clearly focused on specific work tasks. Employees indicated that they learned the importance of processes and related measures and used this to make decisions. Change seemed to be embraced and even welcomed whereas in most organizations this is an unpleasant word. From the view of these employees, their organization is a system that has a plan and they know how they can contribute. Organizational leaders are viewed as critical to the implementation process and are seen as being tuned in to the work force. The employees are realizing their own potential as leaders. They are communicating more up and down the organization's hierarchy and understand the importance of communicating with other organizations from which they can learn. Most striking of all is that many employees have begun to push themselves beyond the status quo and welcome a way of thinking that I like to call "stretching". This was manifested in comments about goals, about being the best, about understanding the Baldrige criteria and about new ways of thinking. A mindset of continual motion was evident, about not being satisfied with reaching one milestone but looking beyond to the next. A status quo way of thinking was obviously absent in many of those I interviewed.

Implementing the Baldrige criteria provides a unique environment from which employees can learn in the workplace. As I reflected on what I had found through my research, not only did I have a list of what these employees felt they had learned, I had a new appreciation for the impact the Baldrige criteria can have on an organization's work force. What an amazing benefit of an implementation journey.