10 Steps
To a Baldrige Award Application

*Even if you don't win, the feedback is invaluable;
and even if you don't apply, the self-assessment
will do wonders for your organization*

by

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ANNUALLY ABOUT 30,000 ORGANIZATIONS REQUEST COPIES OF THE Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award (MBNQA) criteria and application forms. Around the country, 68 state and local organizations sponsor quality award programs based on the Baldrige criteria.

Participating organizations are discovering writing a Baldrige application is a marvelous self-assessment benchmark process. Additionally, submitting an application—particularly to a local award—is a terrific and relatively inexpensive way to gain valuable feedback that would cost several thousand dollars from a consulting firm.

So the questions become: "Should our organization write and submit an application?" and "If we do write an application, what is the best strategy to maximize value to our organization from the process?"

It is important to recognize that preparing an application represents a significant commitment of time and effort over several months. The following 10 suggestions will help you get started:

1. **Get organized.**
2. **Create an overall writing plan.**
3. **Write the performance results metrics as you go.**
4. **Focus on business factors.**
5. **Understand approach and deployment.**
6. **Understand the scoring for approach and deployment.**
7. **Understand the scoring bands.**
8. **Understand integration, linkage and maturity.**
9. **Remember your audience.**
10. **Learn as much as possible.**

1. Get organized

Everyone in an organization should participate in the Baldrige process. This means everyone should know the project is underway, be informed and be asked to contribute information and input.

Appoint a team of champions to shepherd the writing project. These few knowledgeable senior managers should provide information, help knock down barriers, read the document as it is being prepared and support the writing team.

Avoid waiting until the document is complete to ask your champions to read and comment. They should be involved and provided an opportunity to contribute to the writing process while it is underway. If possible give them a subsection at a time for feedback. And remember it is not necessary to have each champion read every section. Ask champions with specific expertise to read specific sections.

The writing team itself should be limited to three individuals. These three people should be long-term employees who are knowledgeable about the organization, its structure and history and have enough positional and personal authority and respect to have access to people and information. Of course, time and resources will need to be allocated so the team can complete the project.

2. Create an overall writing plan

Creating an overall project plan does not mean dividing up the work among individuals and sending them off to write. Rather, it means figuring out what information goes where and how best to present it.

First, organize the writing and champion teams for a study session. If possible conduct the study session

Tips on **Getting Organized**

Don't assign a different person to write each of the seven criteria sections. The Baldrige criteria are a coherent whole with linkages throughout, just as your organization is a coherent whole.

Asking seven people to each describe a piece is akin to the fable of seven blind men describing an elephant. Regardless of how much effort you spend trying to organize this hodgepodge, the final document will be uneven, unable to grasp the linkages, redundant in some areas and missing important information in other areas. You need to create an overall writing plan just as you need to have an overall project plan.

Do not try to write one section of the criteria at a time until everything is completed. If you try to complete one section before moving on to the next, you will find yourself backtracking and rewriting and rearranging criteria previously written. Instead, the entire document should be considered a work in progress and a draft until it is all finalized.

Tips on **Creating the Writing Plan**

In an application, it is perfectly acceptable to write that you have identified an opportunity for improvement and initiated a new program.

Avoid trying to collate the brainstorming lists you created with both the core values and category items. While you can cross reference items in the two lists, keeping them separate will help you focus your writing to clearly respond to the criteria and demonstrate the core values.

If you cannot identify a metric for an activity, then you have identified a hole in your system or perhaps the activity is not really relevant to your strategic operation and not important enough to be included in your application.

off site over a couple of days to avoid distractions and help the teams focus and produce a solid, detailed writing plan.

Start with the 11 Baldrige core values and concepts (they can be found in the Baldrige criteria at www.quality.nist.gov). List each value on a separate flip chart sheet, and then brainstorm and develop a bulleted list of specific things your organization does that reflect and support each core value.

List four to six specific bulleted items or activities for each value. Expect to spend several hours on this task. At its completion you should have a list of specific activities that demonstrates how your organization reflects each core value and a list of concepts to talk about in your application.

Don't worry if there are holes in the lists because you will find ways to fill them during the writing process. Also, the holes represent opportunities for evaluation and improvement.

Next, list the seven Baldrige criteria and subitems—one to a flip chart sheet—and again brainstorm and list specific activities that demonstrate how your organization meets the criteria and each item's requirements.

Many of the items from the core values list will reappear on this criteria list, but this second list will contain additional items. Some items from the core values will not fit and need to be parked for possible inclusion or deletion later.

This process will help in figuring out where to talk about each activity and in avoiding dreaded redundancies in the final document.

Throughout the writing process, add and delete

from these two lists. The exercise of developing the lists serves as a foundation for the rest of the project and helps frame the writing and focus ideas into the language of the core values and concepts.

Finally, when you are satisfied with the two initial lists, brainstorm and identify people within the organization who can provide information, metrics and data about each of the activities.

Now you are ready to begin conducting interviews, gathering information and writing drafts for each category and subitem.

3. Write the performance results metrics as you go

On the list of Baldrige criteria, category seven, business results, is the big one. It's worth 450 points—45% of the total score your application will receive.

Examiners routinely report organizations do a poor job on this section. Perhaps an organization runs short of time, does not have or cannot find the needed data, or does not adequately plan what needs to be done or how to present the information well.

Regardless of the reason, the first of the four key characteristics of category seven is focused on business results. Of the allowable 50 pages in your application, you should devote 15 to 20 pages to category seven. Plan for about three charts or exhibits—plus

dialogue—per page.

One member of the writing team should be assigned to be leader for this category and create the charts and exhibits.

Category seven should support all the activities described in the first six categories. Each key objective and performance activity should flow naturally to a results chart. Unfortunately, if there are no data or results, it may not be worth talking about the activity in the application. More important, regardless of how lovely some data are or how proud you are of them, do not put a chart or exhibit into category seven that is not relevant or does not support one of the first six categories.

The structure asks writers to report results in category seven. For some reason, many application writers have misunderstood this to mean they should not make reference to results in the first six categories of their application. It is acceptable and helpful to examiners, however, if you make a general reference to outcomes from your approach and deployment efforts.

Next, refer to a chart or figure in category seven. For example, write: "We have experienced a downward trend in customer complaints directly attributed to our customer care program (see Figure 1)."

Examiners will be looking for results as they read your first six categories, and these are the kinds of

Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award 2001 Criteria for Performance Excellence

1. Leadership (120 points).
   1.1. Organizational Leadership (80 points).
   1.2. Public Responsibility and Citizenship (40 points).
2. Strategic Planning (85 points).
   2.1. Strategic Development (40 points).
   2.2. Strategic Deployment (45 points).
3. Customer and Market Focus (85 points).
   3.1. Customer and Market Knowledge (40 points).
   3.2. Customer Relationships and Satisfaction (45 points).
4. Information and Analysis (90 points).
   4.1. Measurement and Analysis of Organizational Performance (50 points).
   4.2. Information Analysis (40 points).
5. Human Resources Focus (85 points).
   5.1. Work Systems (35 points).
   5.2. Employee Education, Training and

Development (25 points).
   5.3. Employee Well-Being and Satisfaction (25 points).
6. Process Management (85 points).
   6.1. Product and Service Processes (45 points).
   6.2. Business Processes (25 points).
   6.3. Support Processes (15 points).
7. Business Results (450 points).
   7.1. Customer Focused Results (125 points).
   7.2. Financial and Market Results (125 points).
   7.3. Human Resource Results (80 points).
   7.4. Organizational Effectiveness Results (125 points).

Note: These categories and point values are taken from the manufacturing/service/small business sector criteria. There are slight differences in the health care and the education criteria.

pointers that will help them find this information.

4. Focus on business factors

The Baldrige application allows five valuable pages—in addition to the 50 pages allowed for the application—to describe key business factors. Begin outlining and continue to refine this section of the application as you write the seven criteria.

It is important to understand the examiners will use key business factors as one important filter through which they assess an application. These factors, along with their own experience, the core values and the criteria requirements, help examiners understand an organization and its competition and markets while they assess interpretation and application of the criteria.

For example, small companies, companies in high-tech or highly regulated industries or companies operating within highly competitive arenas each might take a different approach to interpreting and applying the criteria. A carefully considered description of key business factors is an important filter through which examiners can share an organization's vision.

Once you have completed the seven categories, return to and refine the key business factors.

5. Understand approach and deployment

Approach is a description of the framework, structure and plans used to manage an organization. You should explain your organization has an established way you routinely conduct processes and accomplish tasks and activities.

Approach is the "plan" part; deployment is the "do." Deployment is how well the approach is used throughout the organization. It is a depth and breadth issue—across all departments and throughout all levels. Marvelous plans and structures are pipe dreams if they are not appropriately deployed throughout the organization.

Examiners routinely report applicants focus on

FIGURE 1 The Award Process Flowchart
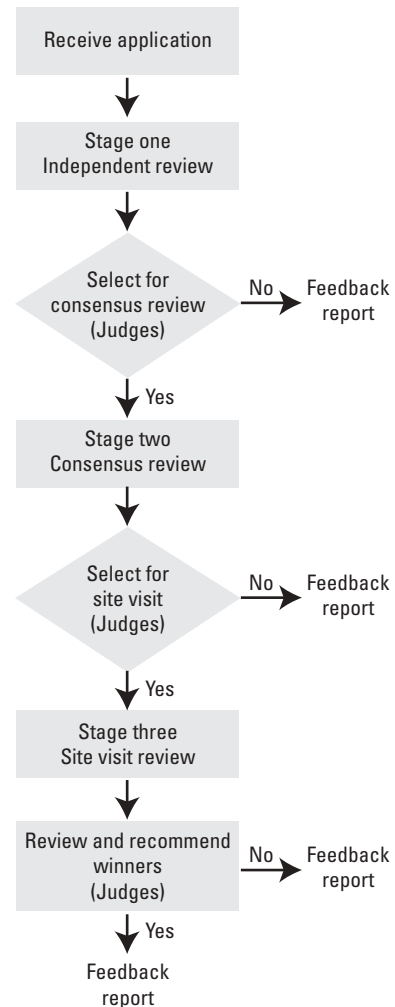
approach without adequately describing deployment. Even worse, applicants recount one or two anecdotal examples of something that has happened without describing the framework that guided the activity.

Because of space limitations, you will be hard pressed to provide many examples of how processes work. You must explain how they are deployed and supported throughout the organization. For every primary activity described, include a sentence or two to describe how it is deployed within the organization.

One of the four key characteristics of the criteria supports "maintaining organizationwide goal alignment." Explain how you deploy your approach so everyone is working to meet objectives and plans.

6. Understand the scoring for approach and deployment

Examiners go through a training program to learn

how to write comments and score an application. Although not a strictly scientific method, the scoring system is well-defined, and the examiners conduct a consensus process to agree on a percentage band within which to score each category item in an application.

Throughout the first six categories, examiners score an application on approach and deployment. Approach and deployment are scored together, rather than separately. An application, therefore, must adequately describe both to receive a good score.

The application information provides a table of scoring guidelines. The writing team should carefully study and understand how each item is scored.

There are three or four bulleted items within each percentage band in the scoring guidelines. The first bulleted item talks about approach. The second bulleted item describes how the item is deployed.

Major gaps in deployment are scored in the 10 to 20% band and some gaps in deployment at 30 to 40%; well-deployed items are scored at 50 to 60%. An effective, systematic approach that is deployed across the organization and responds to multiple requirements of the category is needed for an organization to be scored in the higher bands.

7. Understand the scoring for results, evaluation and improvement

The guidelines for scoring results are also structured in bands, but the bulleted list of items is different. Study the bulleted list, and understand there are

really three parts to scoring results.

First are the results, trends and outcomes reported from your approach and deployment. Additionally, the key characteristic of the category supports goal based diagnosis. Several core values and concepts are reflected in your organizational evaluation and improvement efforts.

So not only must you report good results and trends, but you must also show how you are evaluating results and using those data to drive improvements in your organization's approach and deployment.

If you show good results and trends, the score will be in the 30 to 40% band, at best. To move into the 50% and higher scoring band, you must demonstrate you are conducting relevant comparisons and benchmarks to drive your continuous improvement efforts.

Writing the results criteria can often be an eyeopening and, in some cases, disheartening experience.

Organizations that believe their numbers show they are doing well are sometimes appalled to learn they cannot directly connect their approach objectives and deployment efforts to results. Or when benchmarking other organizations, they discover they have a long and difficult road to traverse to achieve desired levels of excellence.

The MBNQA and most local organizations with Baldrige type awards do not reveal awarded scores, but you and your team should be able to score your own application. If you are able to honestly award 150 out of 450 points—about 30%—for category seven the first time you fill out an application, your organization is doing very well.

8. Understand integration, linkage and maturity

The seven Baldrige categories, core values and key characteristics form an integrated whole. An application must present a picture of an organization as an entity. Do this by linking approach, deployment, results and improvement efforts across the depth and breadth of the organization.

As you carefully construct the document, look for opportunities to describe these linkages and how they support strategic objectives. The team should study and understand a 70% or better approach and deployment score requires an integrated structure that responds throughout an organization and across all criteria items.

Maturity is related to scoring well in performance evaluation and results. The application should clearly show upward trend results, but just as important, should show you are studying results and finding ways to evolve and improve the approach and deployment to support strategic objectives.

For example, if you have initiated a new program, take credit for performance evaluation by describing how you discovered the need for the new initiative and how the new program evolved from existing efforts.

If you simply report a new program with limited results, the examiners will not understand how or why you decided to adopt this new tactic. However, if you show evaluation of prior results led to the new initiative, examiners will be able to score an application higher for results.

9. Remember your audience

Recall what your fourth grade English teacher taught: Remember your audience.

The national and local Baldrige award organizations rely on volunteers who are committed to the quality and organizational excellence process. Examiners are usually provided company time to attend training—although some use vacation time to participate—but they usually do their comment and scoring work on their own time.

That means a typical examiner will sit down to read, comment on and score an application after a full day's work and family evening activities—perhaps after the kids are in bed or while a spouse is doing laundry, vacuuming or paying bills.

Usually examiners spend 20 hours or more working alone to write comments and score an application. Additionally, they will spend another 10 hours or so developing consensus with other team members to prepare a final report. All this is usually done in their "spare time."

Baldrige Cycle Calendar

The Baldrige organization publishes a calendar of events on its Web site. Visit this site for the most recently published calendar for organizations wishing to submit an award application. Most individual state organizations also publish their own schedules of due dates for organizations to submit an application for a state award (see "Annual Quality Awards Listing," p. 62).

The following is a general schedule for the 2002 awards:

January 2002	Application forms and instructions available
April 2002	Eligibility forms due
May 2002	Award applications due
October 2002	Site visits scheduled
April 2003	Quest for Excellence Conference

You can help an examiner read and score your application:

- Write uncomplicated, declarative sentences. Clear, concise writing is appreciated and more readily understood.
- Avoid jargon, and identify all terms and acronyms in a one-page list.
- Work carefully on internal logic; that is, answer all potential questions, and do not leave the examiner wondering about any obvious incongruities or unanswered questions.
- Answer the entire item requirement within the item. Examiners are asked to give you credit if you misplace information within your application. However, you should not rely on your examiner to find misplaced information.
- Make sure you clearly understand what information the item is asking for, and carefully write to answer the question asked for in each category.
- Avoid redundancies like the plague. If you must talk about one activity in two different areas in the application, insert a pointer to the related information.
- It is okay to put in a few carefully selected pointers to cross reference information. But avoid too many that will send a reader flipping around in the application to find information.
- Ferociously edit out unneeded information and distill everything to what is absolutely essential. Your delete key is a friend. Regardless of how proud you are of an activity or result, stay focused on the category item.
- Balance what you write against both the requirements of the category item and the potential score

awarded for the item. Don't write a lengthy explanation for a minor subpoint, and don't write 10 pages for a 15-point item.

- Respond to the requirements in the category. This idea may seem simple, but it is crucial to address the requirements. The examiner will read each category and subitem and should understand from your application how you address each. Use the category's language. Describe your processes in terms of approach, and explain how your organization acts on plans in terms of deployment.
- While you should not fall into the trap of picking up sentences from the criteria, it is common practice to use the criteria paragraph titles and numbering system in your application.
- Part of the writing process must focus on and describe how your approach and deployment activities support and reflect the core values and concepts. Don't assume the examiner will try to make these connections.
- Use clear titles, legends and labels for all graphs, charts, tables and figures. The examiner should be able to instantly grasp the meaning of the data from your well-conceived and well-designed graphs and charts.
- Carefully edit and prepare the final document. The physical document represents your organization. It must be letter perfect and look good. That does not, however, mean slick. A standard word processing program is a perfectly acceptable way to prepare an application. In fact, some examiners are inherently suspicious of overdone, fancy applications that look as if they were put together by a public relations firm.
- Either hire a service to edit your final document or call your local high school and ask it to identify a retired or current English or Latin teacher to proofread and edit the final document.

10. Learn as much as possible

There are many good resources for learning how to write a Baldrige application. In addition to books, commercial courses, consultants and the Baldrige Award Web site at www.quality.nist.gov, the two least expensive and frequently best approaches are to volunteer to be an examiner for a local or state sponsored award process or to actually write an application for your own organization.

Many organizations sponsor staff participation in local award programs as a way for staff to learn more about the process and how to write an application. Don't hesitate to volunteer even if you are just starting out and learning about quality and excellence practices and the award process.

If you decide to write an application, plan on the

Tips ᴏɴ **Learning as Much as Possible**

The local Baldrige organizations' lifeblood is volunteers, and they welcome and are able to provide training and support to new people. But two caveats are appropriate if you decide to volunteer to be an examiner.

1. Many people, including the organization for which you are preparing the feedback report and your fellow examiner team members, are depending on your work.

2. Serving as an examiner is time consuming and difficult work. Training, comment writing, consensus meetings and a site visit can easily consume 120 hours or so–about three weeks–of work.

equivalent of three people spending about 20 to 25% of their time over a three- or four-month period—about 1,500 hours.

While volunteering or writing an application is not a trivial commitment of resources, the payoff is a useful self-assessment and benchmark against world-class organizations that can help set your organization's future direction and lead to bottom-line success.

RESOURCES

The Baldrige organization Web site at www.quality.nist.org has contact information about state, local and regional quality awards as well as a PDF version of the criteria that can be downloaded.

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