How To Prepare An Excellence Award Application

by **Glenn W. Bodinson**

I recently overheard a conversation between two executives. "Why are you spending so much time working on Baldrige? Don't you know total quality management doesn't work?" the first one asked.

The second, a wise business owner, replied:

- "If I don't spend my time developing and delivering the products and services the way my customers want ...
- If I don't spend time developing employees and meeting their needs ...

In 50 Words Or Less

- **Even if you don't expect to receive a Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award or state excellence award, submitting an application has huge benefits.**

- **Develop an application project plan, and get senior leadership involved.**

- **A well-written and examiner friendly application will earn you the points you deserve.**

- If I don't spend time improving productivity and profitability …
- What should I spend my time doing?"

She believed the *Baldrige Criteria for Performance Excellence*[1] represents the best business model in the world and that answering the criteria's questions causes an organization to work on the right stuff in the right way.

Wherever your organization is on its excellence journey, preparing an application can help take performance to the next level when it is part of an improvement system, as shown in Figure 1.

"Even if you don't expect to win the Baldrige award, submitting an award application has valuable benefits. Every applicant receives a detailed feedback report based on an independent, external assessment conducted by a panel of specially trained and recognized experts," said Harry Hertz, director of the Baldrige National Quality Program.

Depending on your goal for submitting an application—to receive the feedback, receive a site visit or become an award recipient—your approach and the amount of effort invested may vary.

The Baldrige Game

It is important your organization write an examiner friendly application. A well-written application makes it easier for the examiners to award all

the points your organization is entitled to, and 50 points can make a difference in receiving or not receiving a site visit. And during a site visit, a well-written application allows examiners to focus on identifying your organization's real strengths and opportunities for improvement rather than trying to figure out what parts of your application mean. The result is a more useful feedback report.

The judges want to know what makes your organization a role model. What is it especially good at? The examiners want to know how well the application scores. What are the strengths? Where are the opportunities for improvement? What are the potential site visit issues?

The trick is to have a great people, process and results story and tell it well. For your application, don't focus on issues and problems that need to be solved. Focus on the things you would brag about to a potential customer.

How Do You Start?

Writing an application needs a process (see Figure 1) and a plan. Table 1 is an example showing each step of an award application project plan:

1. Establish the application project goals, target score and scope. The first step is to establish the objective for completing the award application. An experienced coach usually recommends the minimum goal be to achieve a site visit. During a site visit, examiners clarify areas from the application.

To ensure a site visit, target a score of 80% for each item of each category in the application. The first reason for targeting 80% is the scoring guidelines' language describing approach, deployment, learning and integration at that level is easier to understand than the language for 60% for categories one through six. Category seven, business results, assesses your current level of performance, trends, comparisons and linkage to what is most important to your stakeholders.

The second reason for targeting 80% is it helps increase the probability of a site visit. Even if you miss the 80% target and hit 60% or 70% for each item, you are still in the 600 plus range needed.
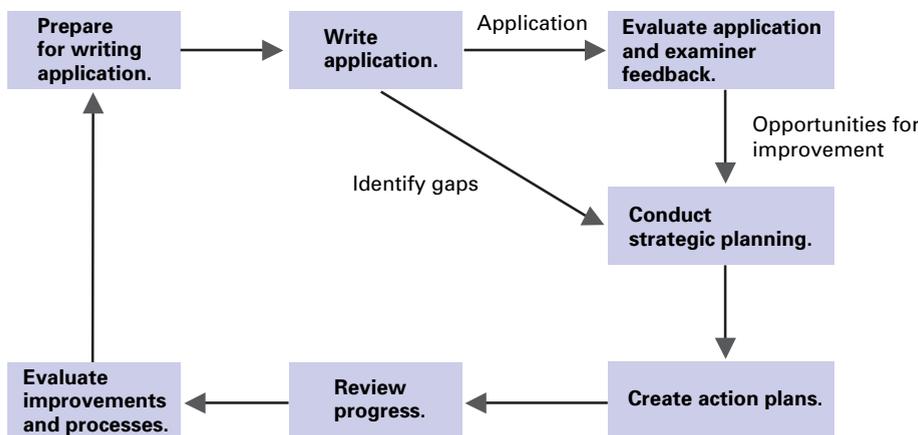
You also need to determine the scope of the application. For example, some decide to submit an application for the entire organization while others may focus on a single division.

2. Assign key player roles, and identify needed personnel resources. While some organizations appoint one person to prepare an application, most find a team approach works best. There should be one overall application project leader, and the application team should be identified with roles, such as copy editor, graphic designer, table creator and proofreader, clearly defined.

One of the best ways to get executive buy-in is to assign each senior leader responsibility for a process category and related items in the business results category. For example, the senior leader who is responsible for category five, HR focus, will also be responsible for item 7.4, HR results. This helps ensure alignment and integration. The senior leader may gather and write the response to the category or use a team to do that task under his or her leadership.

3. Complete application project plan with timeline. Preparing an application is a major project and needs a project plan. An example of an award project plan is shown in Table 2 (p. 46). It contains several loops of plan-do-study-act and was created for Sanden USA, a manufacturer

FIGURE 1 Application Process and Performance Improvement System

TABLE 1 Example One of Application Project Plan

Application project steps	Assigned to	Date	Status
1. Establish application project goals, target score and scope.			
2. Assign key player roles, and identify needed resources.			
3. Complete application project plan with timeline.			
4. Educate senior leaders on the criteria and scoring guidelines.			
5. Identify major themes and strengths.			
6. Prepare the organizational profile.			
7. Establish supporting processes.			
8. Conduct an application workshop.			
9. Gather additional information.			
10. Create charts and graphs.			
11. Prepare and submit eligibility forms before the deadline.			
12. Write and calibrate at 80% for your strongest process and results categories.			
13. Write the first draft quickly.			
14. Review and document gaps and revisions needed for first draft.			
15. Revise the first draft into the second draft.			
16. Review the second draft.			
17. Conduct final editing and proofreading.			
18. Produce the application.			
19. Submit the application before the deadline.			
20. Begin site visit preparation.			
21. Implement improvement projects to close gaps.			
22. Evaluate and improve the application and improvement processes.			

of automotive air conditioning compressors in Wylie, TX, in applying for the Texas Award for Performance Excellence (TAPE).

"Having an application plan with clear roles and timelines, as well as using project management tools, helped us more effectively and efficiently prepare our … application," stated Brad Swadley, senior manager of Sanden total quality management.

4. Educate the senior leaders on the criteria and scoring guidelines. Executives need to understand

the Baldrige criteria and scoring guidelines. The learning objectives include beginning to understand the Baldrige language and comprehend how the examination and judging process works. It's also important executives understand the interrelationship of scoring guidelines and what it will take to hit the target and correctly respond to the what, how and results questions in the criteria. Finally, review the application project plan and timeline with senior leaders. Devoting about four hours to this executive education provides a solid foundation for the workshop explained in step eight.

5. Identify major themes and strengths. The judges will ask the examiners to identify the organization's major themes and strengths that cut across categories. It is best that you feature these prominently in your application after asking the following questions:

- What do we do best?
- What are we most proud of?
- If our organization was a recipient and the award office wrote a two-page highlights press release profile, what would it feature?
- What are the major initiatives—recent past, current and planned?
- What awards have we received?

Examples of profiles for Baldrige recipients can be found are online.[2]

6. Prepare the organizational profile. The organizational profile communicates to the examiner and

TABLE 2 **Example Two of Application Project Plan**

Project step	8/6	8/13	8/20	8/27	9/3	9/10	9/17	9/24	10/1	10/8	10/15	10/22	10/29	11/5	11/12	11/19	11/26
Select application team.	■																
Train project team.			■														
Create storyboards.			■														
List and lay out figures.			■														
Write organizational profile.				■													
Write two-page highlights.					■												
Create figures and captions.						■											
Write application summary.							■	■									
Establish processes: gap, backup and glossary.								■									
Write first draft.									■	■							
Review first draft.											■						
Make revisions.											■						
Submit eligibility form.											■						
Write second draft.												■					
Review second draft.												■					
Improve scoring.													■				
Write final draft.													■				
Review final draft.														■			
Finalize results figures.															■		
Edit and proof application.															■		
Deliver to production.																■	
Submit application.																	■

Source: Project for Sanden USA.

Overcoming Objections

Let's deal with a few of the most common objections to applying for a Baldrige award:

- **I really don't know how to get started.** There are several resources to help you learn more about the performance excellence award process. First, go to the Baldrige National Quality Program website[1] for a copy of the criteria and a self-assessment guide. You could begin with a simple but powerful Baldrige core values and concepts assessment to identify strengths and opportunities for improvement. You may also want to learn best practices from recent Baldrige recipients by attending the Quest for Excellence Conference, held each spring in Washington, DC.

- **Asking me to write 50 pages feels like asking me to complete a 7-foot high jump.** So, start at the state level to get valuable experience. Check to see if your state is one of the 41 states that has a performance excellence award based on the Baldrige criteria.[2,3] Many states, such as Iowa, Tennessee and Texas, have multiple levels of participation. Some levels require only a 10- or 15-page application. Of the last 38 Baldrige recipients, 29 had been recipients in state award programs, using this as an effective steppingstone to applying for the Baldrige.

  David Branch, owner of Branch Smith Printing, a Texas Award for Performance Excellence and Baldrige recipient, said, "We benefited from participating in the state award program first. Fewer pages are required, so it was easier to get started. Our state award was a great steppingstone in applying for the Baldrige."

- **I don't want to submit an application until I believe we can receive an award.** Xerox found 512 "warts" or major gaps when preparing its application the first year it became a Baldrige recipient. Raymond Marlow, CEO of Marlow Industries Inc., which earned a small business category Baldrige award in 1991, has often said, "The worst thing about being a recipient the first year is you miss the annual cycles of refinement that come from being a multiyear applicant."

- **We have no idea of how to work our way through the process.** Many organizations decide the most effective route is to hire an expert coach. Diane Bosworth, assistant superintendent of the Jenks, OK, public schools said, "We hire guides and coaches for other less important areas of our lives; it just makes sense that an organization would hire a coach for something as important as improvement and results."

  The right coach can help you take advantage of early improvement opportunities, focus on the right content, ensure effective application development and move your organization toward a performance excellence culture while meeting your award entry goals.

REFERENCES
1. Baldrige National Quality Program, www.baldrige.nist.gov.
2. Network for Excllence, www.networkforexcellence.org.
3. Valerie Funk, "Annual Quality Awards Listing," *Quality Progress*, August 2004, www.asq.org.

judges what is most important to your organization. Even though this section is not scored or included in the 50-page application limit, it is critical to prepare it carefully. If, for example, you say cost, delivery, quality and cycle time are key customer requirements, then you have set an expectation for the examiners that you will show results for those measures in category seven.

The organizational profile should be edited again after the application is complete to ensure alignment, integration and inclusion of strengths from step five. For organizations just getting started, preparing an organizational profile is a good way to conduct a mini self-assessment. You can learn a great deal of useful information from this exercise.

7. Establish supporting processes. An important early process is the allocation of pages to each category. The profile (limited to five pages), glossary and organization chart do not count in the 50-page limit for the application. Allocating pages by criteria can prevent wasting time writing 12 pages for a category that may warrant only four.

Establish your style and format up-front. Having people prepare material in two columns with the proper margins helps control the page count, for example. Format requirements are detailed in section five of the Baldrige Award Application Forms.[3]

It is important to have a process for documenting gaps as they are found. A gap occurs when you don't have a high scoring answer to one of the criteria's questions. Documenting this prevents you from forgetting it and allows you to begin closing the gap even before you receive the feedback report. And, having a systematic approach for organizing the backup information for the application's contents makes it a lot easier to prepare for the site visit.

In addition, you should establish a process to confirm printer capability and set the schedule and lead time for printing the application contents, cover and tabs, as well as for binding the entire entry.

8. Conduct an application workshop. A workshop can range from a half-day of brainstorming application ideas to a two-day event starting with what the criteria are really asking and ending with the completion of a detailed application action plan and building of storyboards by each category team.

9. Gather additional information. One of the outcomes of the workshop will be the identification of additional data and any information

needed for preparation of the application.

10. Create tables and charts. Applicants begin writing the application and then may have trouble answering the criteria's questions because they are trying to describe a complicated process and getting lost in the details. Beginning with a systems perspective picture of the process makes the writing easier. Tables and charts can also be used to convey a lot of information in less space. The added benefit is the resulting application is more examiner friendly, thus enhancing your score. Table 3 (p. 50) demonstrates saving space while meeting three separate criteria requirements for item 6.2.

11. Prepare and submit eligibility forms before deadline. The Baldrige eligibility forms are available in a *Baldrige Award Application Forms* booklet.[4] Don't wait until the deadline; submit your eligibility certification package as soon as you decide to apply.

12. Write and calibrate at 80% for your strongest process category and results item. Select your strongest process category (criteria one through six) and your strongest results item (7.1-7.6). Evaluate and calibrate these using the criteria and scoring guidelines at the 80% target. Have an application coach score and provide feedback to improve your score. Then, apply this learning to all categories and results. Learn how to write at the 70 to 80% level early to avoid time-consuming rework.

13. Write the first draft quickly. Write your first draft quickly using the profile, storyboards and additional information. This gives you your first look at the entire application.

14. Review and document gaps and revisions needed for the first draft. Have the application team and your coach review the first draft. Document revisions needed to improve the application and any gaps that need to be closed to improve the organization's performance.

15. Revise the first draft into the second draft. The category teams will take the suggested revisions to prepare the second draft, which will be more complete and better integrated. Ensure the major themes and strengths identified in step five are addressed. Be sure all the major processes are named, and include a description of the deployment and cycles of refinement. Ensure the expected results are being shown in category seven.

16. Review the second draft. Review the second draft for clarity and to improve the score. Document

any gaps. Add some sizzle to your strengths. To ensure continued buy-in, it is important senior leaders critically review and suggest improvements to this draft.

17. Conduct final editing and proofreading. During the final edit, include any additional revisions from the review team. Check all cross references carefully for accuracy. At this step, the entire application should be reviewed by a skilled proofreader who is reading the application for the first time.

18. Produce the application. The application content requirements and application report components are described in sections three and four of the *Baldrige Award Application Forms*.[5]

I strongly recommend someone oversee the printing and assembly process to physically check the right material is in the right sequence and behind the correct tabs before all the copies are made. In addition to the 25 copies the Baldrige office requires, you will probably want some for key personnel.

19. Submit the application before the deadline. There are different critical deadlines for submitting the award application on a CD or on paper. It is best to plan to send it in a week early to allow for any unexpected contingencies. Use a shipping method that allows tracking and provides proof of receipt.

20. Begin site visit preparation. Most applicants find it useful to prepare a summary version of the application to share with the entire organization. Use this opportunity to focus on strengths.

If you think there is a chance you will receive a site visit, form teams to begin preparation as soon as the application is sent. The teams can make contingency plans to be executed when you receive notification of the site visit—a much more peaceful path than waiting until you are notified of the visit.

"While it is the application that earns the site visit, it is the preparation of your people in telling your story that determines if you are a recipient," said Ted Easton, vice president of HR for the Bama Cos., a 2004 Baldrige recipient. (Note: Look for the article about the Bama Cos in the June issue of *QP.)*

21. Implement improvement projects to close gaps. Figure 1 (p. 44) shows two

rounds of improvements from the application process. The first round comes from gaps identified during the application preparation. The second comes from the opportunities for improvement identified in the examiner's feedback report. The more significant gaps may also become input into your strategic planning process.

22. Evaluate and improve the application and improvement processes. A systematic approach to continual improvement is the best practice.

Best Practices

Organizations achieve the greatest success when they apply best practices while preparing an award application. I carefully chose the word "preparing" rather than "writing" because the secret of a good application is in the planning and preparation, which makes the writing more effective and efficient.

The lessons learned and the recommended best practices apply not only to the Baldrige award, but also to the Shingo Prize for Manufacturing,[6] the European Foundation for Quality Management's European Quality Award[7] and state performance excellence awards[8, 9] because the principles and

Become an Award Examiner

One way to get a head start on the Baldrige performance excellence process is to become an award examiner. As a Baldrige applicant, you are entitled to enroll one key leader in training to become a Baldrige examiner.

Many organizations have their key leaders become state award examiners and learn what the award team is looking for. Being an examiner also deepens your understanding of the criteria and scoring guidelines.

According to JoAnn Brumit, CEO of Karlee, a Texas Award for Performance Excellence and Baldrige recipient, "Training key leaders as examiners is the best free leadership development program available. Plus they discover best practices and implement them in our company."

TABLE 3 Example of Key Support Process Requirements and Measures

Key process (6.2.a.1)	Owner	Description	Requirements (6.2.a.2)	Measures and figures (6.2.a.4)
Finance/accounting	CFO	Management of financial resources to assure financial health, ability to grow and solvency.	• To bill and collect accounts receivable. • To effectively manage cash. • To review and process accounts payable while obtaining discounts.	• Day sales in accounts receivable 7.3-1. • Days cash on hand 7.3-3. • Debt covenant compliance.
Human resources	Vice president/HR	Management of human resources to assure employee satisfaction, competence, supply benefits and training.	To manage: • Temporary agencies. • Hiring process for permanent employees. • Learning and training opportunities. • Enforcement of HR policies and Equal Employment Opportunity Commission regulations.	• Employee turnover 7.4-1. • Training hours per employee 7.4-3.
Information services	Director of information services	Assurance of appropriate, cost effective use of technology through maximization of system uptime.	To provide: • A reliable, functional and secure hardware and software environment. • Support of due diligence in seeking and investigating new and innovative software solutions.	• System downtime. • Help desk efficiency 7.5-4.

application preparation processes are the same.

Too many award feedback reports include the comments, "It's not clear how … " and "Does not address the criteria." As a result, organizations have to reapply again and again. This prevents them from receiving actionable feedback, which is frustrating and can be prevented by doing the following:

- Learn how to respond to process items and results items effectively. Study the Criteria Response Guidelines from the Baldrige criteria booklet carefully.
- For processes, describe the key steps, show the process is systematic, show the deployment and show evidence of learning and integration.
- Focus on the most critical results using graphs and tables to demonstrate performance levels and trends. Use comparisons or benchmarks to demonstrate your excellence.
- Integrate into category seven text that describes why that result is important and how it was accomplished.

Preparing an application can be a valuable investment of time and effort. The payoff comes in improved communication as the cross functional category teams learn more about the entire business. One TAPE applicant used the story developed for its application as part of a sales presentation to win a huge new contract.

Closing gaps identified during the application process will help take your organization's performance to the next level. Preparing for a site visit will sharpen the organization's focus, alignment and deployment.

If you are not ready to write an application, there are easy ways to start using the Baldrige criteria and framework.[10] Do it. Applying the power of performance excellence will pay off in huge benefits for your organization.

REFERENCES, NOTES AND WEBSITES

1. *Baldrige Criteria for Performance Excellence*, National Institute of Standards and Technology, 2005.

2. Baldrige National Quality Program, www.baldrige.nist.gov/Contacts_Profiles.htm (case sensitive).

3. Baldrige Award Application Forms, www.quality. nist.gov/Publications.htm (case sensitive).

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

6. Shingo Prize for Excellence in Manufacturing, www. shingoprize.org.

7. European Quality Award, www.efqm.org.

8. Network for Excellence, www.networkforexcellence.org.

9. Valerie Funk, "Annual Quality Awards Listing," *Quality Progress*, www.asq.org.

10. The Baldrige criteria are revised every two years. For access to a free copy of a tool that compares the old and new criteria in one document, readers should go to www. ba-performancepartners.com.

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