

Slow Down, Think Clearly, Move Crisply Grasp the Subtle Essence of Baldrige Excellence

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We often hear that organizations are "too busy" to improve themselves. Sorry, this is a poor excuse. "Too busy" is often shorthand for a lack of knowledge and awareness. Smart managers know instinctively that at any moment many (most?) of the activities underway in their organizations are not optimized in any meaningful way. "Too busy" really means chaotic, random, undisciplined thinking that undermines the passion and principles of the organization, its employees, and its customers and other stakeholders.

No, "too busy" does not cut it. But if you are serious about raising the bar for performance, there is a wonderful tool at your disposal: the Baldrige Performance Excellence System. Baldrige is about as close to a sure thing as you can get when it comes to organizational improvement in an uncertain world, but success requires that you not only look at the mechanics of the Baldrige process, but that you seek out the subtle essence of Baldrige Excellence. We have seen promising Baldrige initiatives get untracked when organizations begin implementing ("doing") without achieving the state of understanding ("being") necessary to truly transform.

What is a transformational state of being? We suggest the following steps to get yourself into position to not only lead the change, but be the change.

Slow Down

The world is getting faster. True leadership means going slower. Slower in the sense of listening completely, thinking fully about all options, and evaluating the consequences of all possible decisions. There is a reason that the Baldrige Criteria are expressed as questions: only you can ask the right questions for your organization, and only you can assess the implications. The essence of Baldrige is to take a proven set of international best practices that have been field-tested for twenty years by great (and some not-so-great) organizations and apply them in your own organization; in other words, to stand on the shoulders of giants. But, and this is a big "but", you can only do this if you understand what makes your organization tick at every level. Slow down, and this level of awareness will grow in you and your team.

Think Clearly

The world is getting more complex. The natural response is to seek out more information. The

transformational leader recognizes the danger and seeks out less information. The balanced scorecard goes from 45 metrics to 15. The customer survey goes from 20 questions to 3 (and then to zero, as the survey is dropped when the customer becomes part of the process). The meeting agenda goes from 10 items to 5. The focus moves from information quantity to quality; the relevant drives out the urgent but less relevant. More analysis, applied to less, but higher value, information, enhances clarity of thinking.

Move Crisply

Half-hearted implementation can destroy the best of plans. The transformational leader strives incessantly to ensure that decisions are understood, communicated, and implemented crisply and decisively. The slow, clear thinking has revealed the path to transformation, but the actions must be aligned and consistent. The beauty of the Baldrige Performance Excellence System is that it shines a spotlight on your gaps. Move firmly whenever the data indicates a need to change. The weight of expectations, fears, and concerns cannot be allowed to sidetrack the necessary improvement work. There can be no sacred cows in an organization aspiring to excellence.

Stick with Baldrige Performance Excellence

We sometimes hear that Baldrige Performance Excellence is "too heavy", too "process oriented", or just too difficult, to be useful. This drives us crazy, because Baldrige is actually the antithesis of these perceptions; structured by reason, Baldrige forces organizations away from waste and irrelevance. Organizations that "get" Baldrige are crisp in design and execution, able to articulate at all levels of the organization why they do things the way they do. Management by fact replaces management by opinion, which is the foundation for true transformation.