What Is a Key Theme?

Definition	A key theme is a perception or observation that is frequently strategic in nature; recurs throughout the scorebook, across processes and results; and reflects major strengths, opportunities, or vulnerabilities. (In BOSS, major strengths and opportunities for improvement [OFIs] at the item level are often indicated with ++ or - - signs.)
Features	Key theme comments • address important strengths or opportunities for improvement as reflected in the applicant's key factors • are often common to more than one item/category (crosscutting) or address an issue of particular significance in one item (often found in a bolded comment) • must be traceable to comments found in the Consensus Review Worksheets • may address a core value of the Criteria • summarize how well an applicant has addressed the Criteria requirements • serve as an executive summary and include strategic considerations
How to Identify Key Themes	The "a" and "b" key theme comments are related to process items and provide the applicant with value-added information in addressing important issues. Key theme comments may highlight multiple evaluation factors—approach, deployment, learning, and integration (ADLI)—that contribute to the strength or OFI. The following questions will help support the key themes: • Which approaches are sound and systematic (or not)? • Which approaches are well-deployed throughout the organization (or not)? • Are there areas of strength or opportunity related to organizational learning? • Where is there strong linkage between and among processes? What areas are poorly aligned? In a more mature applicant, what areas exhibit or lack integration? The "c" and "d" key theme comments, which are related to results items, may highlight multiple evaluation factors that contribute to a significant strength or vulnerability. The following questions related to the results evaluation factors—levels, trends, comparisons, and integration (LeTCI)—may help to support key themes. • Are results trending consistently either up or down? If results are tracked over time, are good or excellent performance levels sustained? • How do results compare to those of competitors or other organizations with similar offerings? Are adequate comparisons provided? • To what extent are results segmented to reflect important customer, product and service, market, process, and action plan performance requirements identified in the Organizational Profile and in process items? • Do you see any role-model processes or results? • Core values also may serve as a source for key themes when examples can be identified from item comments. Are Criteria core values (e.g., visionary leadership, management by fact) reflected in the item comments?
Example	The applicant's well-executed approach to organizational learning supports its strategic advantage of a cultural focus on identifying problems, innovating solutions, and improving performance results. Approaches that are important to organizational success are continuously improved. For example, improvements

	resulting from the annual evaluation of the SPP include the revision of planning horizons, the introduction of the Strategic Alignment Document, and the formation of the MIG. Other examples that resulted from organizational learning are the Product and Service Offering Process, the VOC Process, workforce engagement and communication processes, and approaches to improve work processes. *This is a key theme because it* • *goes beyond one area to address, item, or category* • *describes various systematic processes that are important to the organization's performance and linked to the organization's key factors* • *is integrated (in harmony across the organization)* • *is linked to a core value—organizational learning*
Nonexample	It is not clear how the applicant supports rapid execution of new action plans after they are identified, assigned to a manager, and approved. This may impact the organization's ability to modify action plans midcourse if circumstances require. *This is not a key theme. Although the content of the comment may be important to the applicant's agility, the comment articulates only one of the multiple requirements of item 2.2. The only instance that an item-level comment such as this would rise to the level of a key theme would be if this OFI had been bolded (as indicated by - - signs in BOSS) to signal its significance as a vulnerability for the applicant.*
Key Themes Worksheet Guidelines	• Limit the worksheet to 2–3 pages. • Organize it into four sections to address the four questions: a—process strengths, b—process opportunities, c—results strengths, and d—results opportunities. • Write complete sentences that adhere to the Comment Guidelines, beginning with a summary (i.e., topic) sentence that provides the "nugget" of feedback. • Include a few examples as evidence to add clarity and value for the applicant, without parroting the application. Avoid telling the applicant what it already knows (e.g., data from figures and steps included in processes). • Delineate the key themes with bullets.