

From Vision to Outcomes:
Building a Comprehensive Continuous
Improvement System for High Performance

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BACKGROUND

During the spring term of 1999, one community college leadership team made the decision to follow the *Malcolm Baldrige in Education* criteria. “The *Baldrige Criteria for Performance Excellence* provides a systems perspective for understanding performance management. The Criteria represent validated, leading-edge management practices against which an organization can measure itself. With their acceptance nationally and internationally as the model for performance excellence, the Criteria represent a common language for communication among organizations for sharing best practices.”¹ This leadership decision was noteworthy since few, if any community colleges had begun to use the Baldrige criteria in a comprehensive way and only a small number of universities had done so. The community college senior leadership made the ground-breaking decision for several reasons: (1) decreasing financial resources and an increasingly under-prepared student body required the college to become more efficient and effective, (2) the trend toward increasing accountability at both the federal and state levels; (3) increased competition for students from area colleges and universities as well as distance learning institutions, and finally (4) the visionary need to “change ahead of the curve.” As one author stated, “Many institutions wait too long to attempt transformations, doing so only when the signs of trouble have become obvious. But in today’s unforgiving environment, that’s probably too late. High performers by contrast, change before they must, knowing that the best way to transform is from a position of strength.”²

RATIONALE

The decision to follow the Baldrige Criteria was the first step in a paradigm shift that occurred at the community college. However, the most profound step was the design and implementation of a comprehensive institutional measurement system. This new measurement system represented a substantial change from past college management practice. The system design is as follows: (1) four broad and encompassing institutional priorities, sixteen strategically focused key performance indicators and approximately one-hundred actionable institutional measures, (2) targets for performance for the short and longer-term, and (3) action plans, both institutional and departmental, to achieve stated targets. The total commitment by senior leadership makes the system a powerful tool for continuous improvement. Leadership set the initial measures and targets, with input from faculty and staff during an annual three-day strategic planning retreat. This disciplined practice continues each year with robust discussions and input college-wide regarding strategic targets and direction. Once targets and measures are set for the academic year, leadership tracks them without adjustment or excuse. As Jim Collins stated, “You can change your plans through the year, but you never change what you measure yourself against. You are rigorous at the end of year, adhering exactly to what you said was going to happen.”³ The Baldrige Criteria provides the focus and framework for the design of the college measurement system. Adherence to the system provides a discipline that makes agility and strategic innovation possible.

KEY ELEMENTS

An integral part of the measurement process is the monthly tracking system designed to monitor performance-to-target for each institutional measure. Each month the college leadership reviews the institutional report card and, if performance falls short of projection, leadership “peels the onion” to determine root cause of the problem. By monitoring progress each month, the college is able to affect institutional outcomes through timely and corrective action instead of waiting until the end of the year to discover that performance was less than expected. The monthly report card is also an effective tool for keeping senior leadership, faculty and staff focused on stated priorities and objectives. Each monthly report card is posted on the college intranet to be viewed by the college community.

At the conclusion of each academic year, the monthly tracking results in an *End of Year Report* produced by the college Office of Planning and Research for Institutional Effectiveness. The *End of Year Report* provides an analysis of performance-to-target for each institutional measure. When performance falls short, the college initiates corrective actions described in the report. Most importantly, the end of year results, environmental scanning, and benchmarking efforts inform strategic planning for the next academic year and the cycle begins anew.

CHALLENGES

The decision to make such a significant change in college management did not come without challenges. First and foremost was paradigm blindness from selected faculty and staff. They saw no reason to change what seemed to be working. Other faculty and staff were threatened by the increased emphasis on accountability and institutional effectiveness. Many felt their jobs would be threatened if they failed to meet targets. The senior leadership addressed these challenges through regular communication, often in small group settings to answer questions and allay fears. The Office of Planning and Research conducted numerous training sessions on the monthly report card and how it is used to help the college continuously improve. Leadership published user-friendly reports available to the college-wide community. Most importantly the college leadership stressed that the purpose of our measurement system is to “improve” not to “prove.” Furthermore the college president emphasized that the leadership is “data-informed” instead of the often used term “data-driven.” The steadfast commitment to the measurement system and the Baldrige Criteria is an important indicator to faculty and staff that this change is not a fad but indeed the way the college will conduct business from this time forward.

CONCLUSION

One community college demonstrated that the *Malcolm Baldrige in Education Criteria* is an effective tool for achieving performance excellence. The college comprehensive measurement system is sustainable over the long term and replicable by institutions within and outside higher education. This community college regards the Baldrige as the wise Socratic teacher, firmly grounded in the belief that the answers lie within the student elicited through a process of asking rigorous questions over and over, in a non-prescriptive way. An ancient Buddhist proverb asserts that “when the student is ready, the teacher will appear.” To paraphrase in the language of Baldrige and Socrates, the student who is ready will teach himself.

Notes

- ¹ Baldrige National Quality Program (2004). "Baldrige Criteria for Performance Excellence," Retrieved July 20, 2007, from http://www.quality.nist.gov/Education_Criteria.htm

- ² Breene, Tim, Shill, Walter E., & Nunes, Paul F. (2007), "Transformation: Changing Ahead of the Curve," Retrieved June 29, 2007, from .
http://www.accenture.com/Global/Research_and_Insights/Outlook/By_Issue/Y2007/ChangingAheadCurve.htm

- ³ Collins, Jim, (2001) *Good to Great* (p. 122). New York: HarperCollins