

A Baldrige Success Story:

Milliken—The Last Man Standing

*By Dawn Marie Bailey*

Some 147 years ago, Milliken & Company was selling woolen goods manufactured in New England; it soon expanded to represent the cotton mills of the southern United States. With a passion to be not the biggest but the best, the Milliken family led the company through the turbulent 1980s when imported textiles flooded U.S. markets and through the 1990s when the company had eight U.S. textile competitors doing over $1 billion in business each year. Today, those competitors are gone; Milliken is the last man standing. One of the keys to its success: a strong foundation built on the Baldrige Criteria for Performance Excellence.

“You can’t argue with the [Baldrige] Criteria because it is sound and it is fundamental. Everything Milliken has done is built and building on that foundation. . . . Baldrige served us well and served a lot of companies well. . . . It truly is a beacon for operational excellence.”

Craig Long, VP, Performance Solutions by Milliken, 1989 Baldrige Award Recipient

Craig Long, vice president, Performance Solutions by Milliken, said the question he gets most often is how did you do it? He said the answer has three parts: (1) positioning in the right market, (2) a commitment to innovation and value-added products, and (3) a commitment to operational excellence.

Today, Milliken has 39 manufacturing facilities located in the United States, United Kingdom, Belgium, France, and China, as well as other global sales and service operations, and has evolved to the production of innovative chemical additives and colorants; floor coverings; performance, workwear, and protective fabrics; industrial and specialty textiles; and composites. It also has become a business that teaches other companies about product and manufacturing innovation.

When Milliken applied for the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award in the late 1980s, it received a long list of things that it could do better. Long said the company really worked that list and ultimately won the award in 1989. As a privately held company, the best-practice sharing that came with receiving the award was at first uncomfortable, he said, but “once we got into it, we found we really liked it! We learned as much from people in [different] industries as they learned from us.” Long estimates that 10,000 companies have come through Milliken to benchmark best practices.

For Milliken, Baldrige helped instill a focus on quality as part of the company’s very foundation. He said Milliken began to assess itself internally using Baldrige standards until the Baldrige Criteria became completely ingrained in the way employees thought and the way they worked.

“You can’t argue with the Criteria because it is sound and it is fundamental, “Long said. “Everything Milliken has done is built and building on that foundation.” Milliken set up internal Baldrige competitions, with five different categories, and with businesses and support areas competing. The application process was exactly the same as the Baldrige process, with trained judges and site visits throughout the company. The state of South Carolina now has a quality award (Milliken Medal of Quality) for individual performance, also based on Baldrige.

With Baldrige as a foundation, Long said Milliken’s approach to operational excellence has created a competitive advantage for the company. The company got so much out of winning the Baldrige Award that it applied and eventually won the European quality award, the Canadian quality prize, and the British quality award. Baldrige also encouraged the company to “go out and see the best of the world,” which led to global study missions for industry best practices.

“We believe that without operational excellence, we could be with those other eight [out-of-business] competitors today,” Long said. “We’re continuing to build on that foundation with a focus on innovation in three areas: deep science, unique insights, and meaningful design. What Milliken has done is to evolve over time, and actually today, the company is debt free and financially strong.

“Baldrige served us well and served a lot of companies well. . . . It truly is a beacon for operational excellence. . . It gets you started on a path of continuous organizational learning.”

The journey continues.