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Face of Quality

A Road Map for the Future

The Baldrige Criteria May Provide Such a Roadmap for Change.

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Technology continues its dramatic advances and it's as much daunting as it is exciting to think about what the future has in store for us. Certainly the economic landscape is a minefield that presents a multitude of challenges.

Successful organizations will have a roadmap to help them navigate the future. This roadmap should help the organization focus on providing customers with products that make their lives smarter, simpler, enjoyable, synchronized, and safer. Quality needs to play an important role in this roadmap, so an effective quality system may hold the answer.

There are quite a few quality system models available today, but I believe the one which best accomplishes the above concepts is the successful implementation of the Baldrige Criteria for Performance Excellence. The Baldrige criteria changes the way an organization manages by focusing efforts on the customer and by placing emphasis on delivering outstanding business results through the seven categories: leadership; strategic planning; customer and market focus; measurement, analysis, and knowledge management; workforce focus; process management; business results.

As a former Baldrige and state award examiner I've not encountered an organization that has implemented the criteria without challenges. The organizations that gain the most benefit from the process use the criteria as a model for change. They don't concern themselves with "winning," but with effective implementation with the goal of continuously improving their processes.

Along the way, the successful implementers (not necessarily defined by winners) have learned valuable lessons, including:

Top down commitment and involvement. Cascading from the boardroom throughout the organizational management there must be a strong commitment and involvement in quality initiatives. Managers must set the example and take an active role in monitoring and auditing processes while searching for ways to improve all aspects of the business.

Never lose site of the customer's priorities. Organizations must always remember that customers are their primary reason for existence. If you don't believe that, try doing without them for a while!

Initiate tough goal setting. As far back as 1951 in his first edition of his “Quality Handbook,” Dr. Joseph M. Juran stressed the importance of goals focused on quality and the customers and it’s no less true today. To ensure they have the highest standards, forward-thinking organizations regularly benchmark best-in-class companies to assess their processes, products and services against those of the competition.

Implement measurement systems to track progress. At both the macro and micro levels, successful organizations must always remain committed to finding and tracking measurable results. The key is to focus on the vital few and not the trivial many. This will ensure clarity and organizational synergy.

Provide ongoing education and training. Dr. Juran, Dr. W. Edwards Deming, and Philip Crosby were just three of the modern quality giants who stressed the importance of education. This makes employees more skilled and knowledgeable which often leads to greater involvement in the quality processes which cannot be overemphasized. Employees must be trained in the “whys” and “how tos” of quality and what it means to the employees, the organization, and, most of all, the customers.

Communicate the message. Organizations must guard against groupthink by being open. It is important to understand failures so everyone can guard against repeating those mistakes. Communicating successes, however, is a crucial step in ensuring that organizations can build upon them in the future.

Never be satisfied with the status quo. To survive, organizations must always strive for continuous improvement. Product and service quality must exceed, or at least meet, that of their competition. It must be used to drive bottom-line performance and sustain their competitive advantage. As we move deeper into the 21st century, the bar will continue to rise, making it even more imperative that organizations continue to examine their commitment to quality and search for ways to continuously improve their business and ongoing relationship with their customers.

If your organization’s key initiatives are to increase sales, improve profits, deliver more value to the customer, and to lead the competition, your organization should adopt a business framework that will drive increasingly higher levels of performance excellence. If your organization has not yet achieved such levels of excellence, why not consider the Baldrige Criteria as a roadmap for the future? Baldrige organizations regularly outperform the S&P 500 significantly so there is strong evidence this model works. The effort isn’t free, but there is a significant return on investment so there is much to be gained. To paraphrase Dr. Deming, you don’t have to do anything, survival is not compulsory!