



Journey to Excellence

by Dawn Marie Bailey

Baldrige capstone projects **help leaders drive** organizational change

In 50 Words Or Less

- Baldrige executive fellows embarked on capstone projects to address challenges within their organizations.
- Participants integrated feedback from other executive fellows and Baldrige award recipients, and applied the Baldrige criteria to find a solution.
- Executives brought the knowledge they gained back to their organizations, contributing to a culture of excellence.

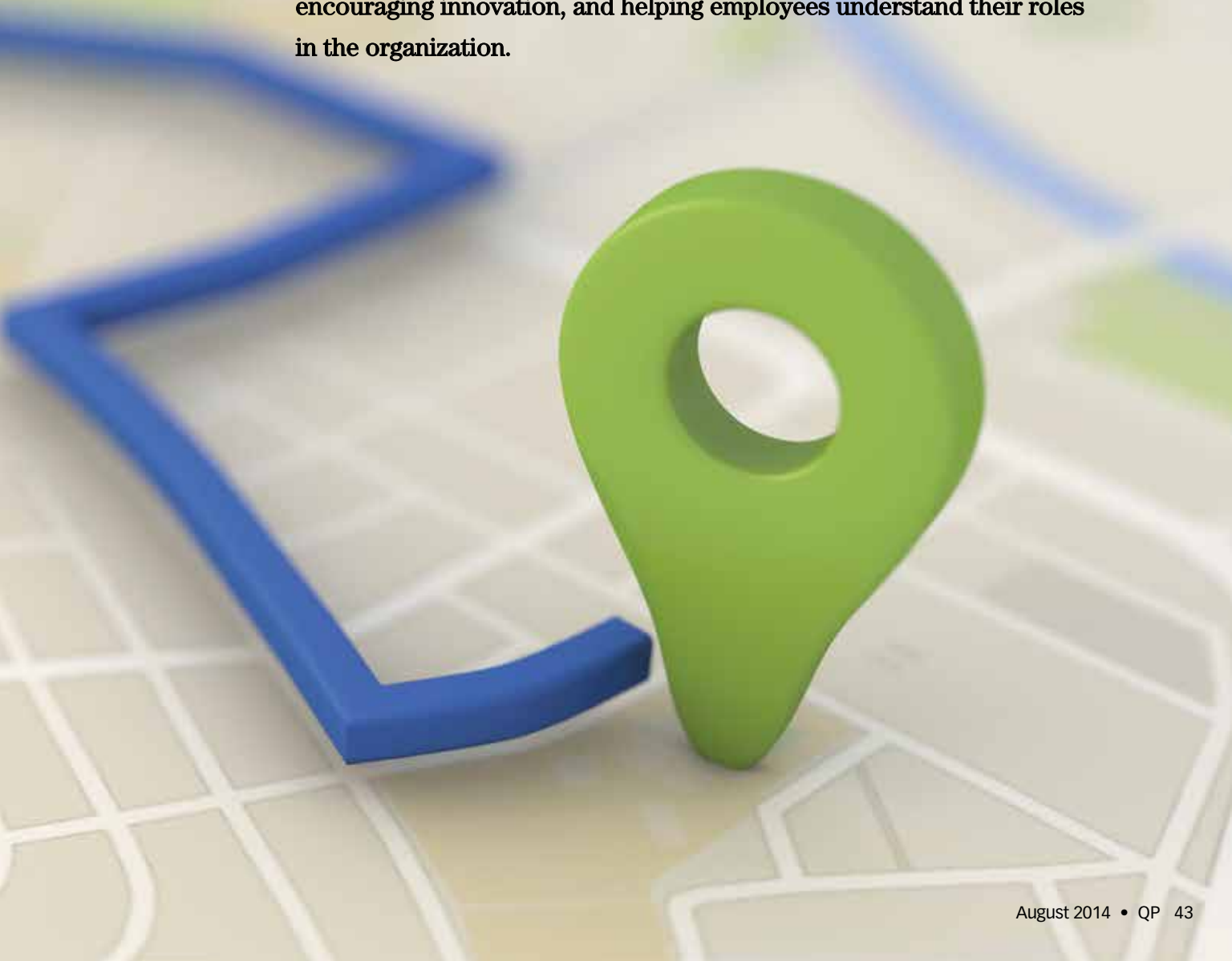
“EXCELLENCE IS A cultural journey.” That was an insight made at the end of the first gathering of the Baldrige executive fellows, a group of senior leaders embarking in 2011 on a new program to look at leadership through the lens of the *Baldrige Criteria for Performance Excellence*.¹

As part of the program, fellows created capstone projects to address something of strategic significance they faced within their own unique organizations. What these senior leaders achieved through their capstones not only led to measurable improvements but also transformed cultures.

Capstone project

In masonry, a capstone is a finishing stone. In the military, a capstone leadership program is reserved for newly promoted brigadier generals and admirals to learn about the integration of military strategies and national strategic objectives. For senior leaders selected to participate in the Baldrige executive fellows program, a capstone project integrates leadership lessons learned from other senior leaders and the seven categories of the Baldrige criteria to impact and resolve a challenge in their own organizations.

Figure 1 (p. 45) shows an example of the lessons learned and captured after a fellows session related to leadership and strategic planning, specifically to setting organizational directions and values, encouraging innovation, and helping employees understand their roles in the organization.



Each fellow has a sponsor, who is often the highest-ranking executive in his or her organization. In collaboration with the sponsor, the fellow develops an approach to an organizational challenge that taps learning and leadership skills gained from the fellows program. To complete a capstone, fellows:

- Identify specific problems or issues.
- Define clear goals and specific objectives.
- Develop detailed proposals and timelines for completion, with the goal of completing the projects (or having reached significant milestones) during the year-long fellows program.
- Conduct primary and secondary research, as needed.
- Perform quantitative and qualitative analyses.
- Develop and test solutions.
- Formulate options and recommendations.
- Produce written reports for their organizations.
- Deliver brief written presentations at the final fellows program session that focuses on their organizations' intended audience, such as the board of directors or employees.
- Deliver more detailed presentations within their own organizations, as appropriate.

Bringing knowledge home

Some of the fellows looked at their capstone projects as a way to first float an idea past executives from other organizations—even other sectors—and obtain feedback from senior leaders from Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award-earning organizations. A Baldrige executive-in-residence—a retired Baldrige award-earning executive—traveled with the fellows and acted as a peer and voluntary staff member of the Baldrige Performance Excellence Program. It was important that this be a discreet, safe space where the fellows could share, compare and learn about personal organizational challenges and understand lessons learned by Baldrige award-earning executives during face-to-face sessions at the Baldrige Quest for Excellence Conference and at the sites of Baldrige award-earning organizations, such as Cargill and the Ritz-Carlton.

Due to the fellows' code of conduct, careful avoidance of conflicts of interest, respect for and protection of proprietary information, and mutual respect earned through the course of the program, the fellows developed a peer network that elicited ideas and inspiration from unique places.

"A recent experience reminded me of the value of seeking ideas and inspiration from elsewhere," said Peter Pronovost, M.D., senior vice president for patient safety and quality at Johns Hopkins Medicine. "I was among 15 execu-

tives from various fields who toured Cargill through a fellowship run by the [Baldrige program]. On a visit to Cargill Corn Milling, among the largest of the gigantic company's 75 business units, I heard a story with unexpected parallels to healthcare."

During visits to the Baldrige award-earning business units—Cargill Corn Milling and Cargill Kitchen Solutions—the fellows toured the factory floor and spoke to employees as food was prepared. Pronovost said he learned "some of the best ideas for improving healthcare come from outside our field," and he brought back his learning from the manufacturer regarding cultures of customer focus, continuous improvement and accountability.

"Mostly what I learned on my visit to Cargill is that excellence is a choice. It is not easy, and it requires a system like the Baldrige [criteria] framework; yet it absolutely is possible," Pronovost said.

In sessions titled, "Visionary Leadership That Works," "Operational Intelligence," and "Leading for Engagement," fellows built on learning and discussion gleaned from the Baldrige criteria-driven cultures of role-model organizations.

Dave Brucks, executive director of Seagate Technology's functional excellence program, said his organization benefited from learning about high-performing organizations and how their processes could apply at Seagate.

"We've used some of the best practices already, for example, in how we manage customer complaints," he said. "I was able to pen characteristics of good customer complaint processes from [Baldrige award-earning] hospitals, restaurants and other manufacturers. ... Baldrige core values, concepts and the [Baldrige] *Criteria for Performance Excellence*² framework are integrated into their business models and demonstrated on a daily basis by their people."

Based on Brucks' capstone project, Seagate is establishing a functional excellence program to move it beyond its ISO 9001 and ISO 14001-certified compliance model to a performance excellence model that raises expectations in all areas of the global business.

Jo Ann Jenkins, chief executive officer of AARP Inc., said, "As a fellow, I was able to establish invaluable connections and garner insights into how other leading organizations—both private and public—are developing and implementing innovative, effective strategies in support of operational excellence and leadership development.

"A significant insight that is often undervalued is that the leadership and senior management must model its organization's mission consistently, with passion and enthusiasm. They must truly 'walk the talk'—particularly during times of change," she said.

At AARP, a large benefits firm for people 50 or over, learning from the fellows program led it to rethink its programs and services.

“The Baldrige criteria were instrumental in driving our organization to seek and listen to the voices of those we serve. ... With the Baldrige criteria as our guide, we have implemented a customer feedback loop for all of our programs and for the volunteers that serve in our programs. It is providing us with actionable feedback that allows us to excel at living up to our mission,” she said. “Applying the principles of the Baldrige criteria can help an organization perform and become more efficient, thus engaging more donors to help achieve the organization’s mission.”

When John Varley, vice president of quality and mission success of Lockheed Martin Missiles and Fire Control (MFC), participated in the fellows program, he had an idea for a capstone project that “was pretty startling to colleagues,” said Steven Sessions, supplier quality director and deputy of quality and mission success at MFC. Varley’s project focused on how to improve the entire Department of Defense (DoD) supply chain.

Sessions said MFC already was working on strategies to address supply chain issues, a common challenge for manufacturers with a multi-tier supply chain. When the economy began to squeeze the smaller, lower-level contractors, the tendency was not to lay off the person who created the parts but the person who was in charge of checking the quality of the parts, he said.

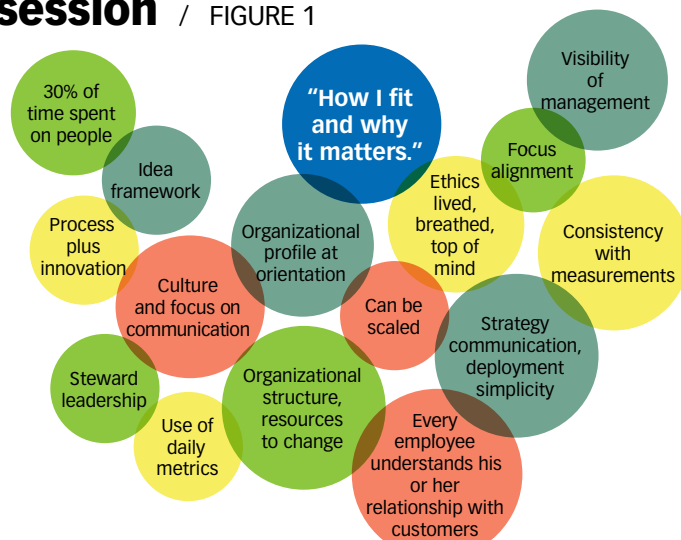
MFC has contractual relationships with the first line of its supply chain, but the manufacturer needed to know how to assess the risk with lower-level tiers that farm out parts of its work.

“[Varley]’s premise was that we either all improve together or all decline together because we are so integrated,” Sessions said. “It was an interesting insight. We tried to figure out how to use the Malcolm Baldrige [criteria] model to open up doors to companies that five years ago you would never have thought would open their doors to share processes, tools and techniques on how to improve the DoD supply chain.”

Based on the Baldrige criteria, a strategy called senior leadership engagement and benchmarking was developed by MFC.

“[Baldrige] has made the whole effort take off to the point now where we’re having to leverage seasoned people with more people in the organization in order to keep up with requests,” Sessions said. “The interesting part is that we started out thinking that we are going to be ... helping [other DoD contractors] improve, and we’ve been able to do that.

Example of lessons learned and captured after a fellows session / FIGURE 1



“But out of it, we gained a lot of insight into areas in which we can improve our journey, as well. What started out as ‘boiling the ocean’ materialized into a real partnership and relationship with some significant companies that are coming up with ideas on how to improve the supply chain that any of us by ourselves probably would not have been able to achieve.”

As a tool, capstone projects helped Baldrige executive fellows advance their organizations to the next step—from improving healthcare processes, to moving from a compliance model to a performance excellence model, to creating a customer feedback loop, to creating a strategy that would improve the entire DoD supply chain. Through the Baldrige executive fellowship, these projects have integrated learning about leadership, the criteria management framework, and the support and advice of a peer network to truly make excellence a cultural journey. **QP**

REFERENCES

1. *Baldrige Criteria for Performance Excellence*, www.nist.gov/baldrige/publications/criteria.cfm.
2. *Ibid.*

NOTE

For more on the Baldrige executive fellowship, visit <http://nist.gov/baldrige/fellows/index.cfm>. The application deadline for the next cohort is late December 2014.



DAWN MARIE BAILEY is a writer and editor at the Baldrige Performance Excellence Program in Gaithersburg, MD.