How the Baldrige Framework Supports Customer-Focused Excellence

By Christine Schaefer

This Fall, the Improvement and Compliance Service (ICS) within the Office of Finance and Planning of the National Cemetery Administration (NCA) hosted an event called Engagement Day. The target audience included NCA managers, analysts and new employees. On the morning’s agenda were overviews of ICS’ internal business plan, skills matrix and performance scorecard. Next was an overview of the Baldrige Excellence Framework and its core concepts. In the afternoon, participants could practice using process improvement tools.

The activities reflect extensive use of the framework within this subunit of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs to promote evidence-based best practices in internal management. The Washington, DC-based NCA has embraced the framework as the basis for regular self-assessments of national cemeteries and NCA staff and for periodic reviews conducted during ICS-led site visits. The framework provides the foundation for a standardized process to assess the performance and organizational health of NCA cemeteries, districts and central office components.

The Baldrige Excellence Framework

The Baldrige Excellence Framework, which includes criteria for performance excellence, is an organizational assessment tool. It promotes leadership and management practices that nationally recognized role model organizations have validated through their high performance. The criteria comprise comprehensive questions in seven categories of organizational performance. Regularly revised by the Baldrige Performance Excellence Program at the National Institute of Standards and Technology, the resource is used annually to evaluate applicants for the nation’s highest and only presidential award for U.S. organizations that demonstrate excellence: the Baldrige Award. Perhaps more important, thousands of organizations, of every size and sector, use the framework to conduct self assessments aimed at improving their performance, promoting innovation and supporting long-term success.

The prestigious award and the small federal program administering it were established in 1987 following the death of Malcolm Baldrige. An innovator in business and a genuine cowboy, Baldrige was serving as the nation’s secretary of commerce when he died in a rodeo accident.

The first version of the Baldrige framework was developed in the late 1980s both to identify national role models and their best practices and to help U.S. businesses assess their performance to compete successfully in the global economy. Incorporating a systems perspective, the framework promotes integration of leadership, strategic planning, operations and other key processes and continuous improvement and innovation within organizations. (More information on the framework is available at www.nist.gov/baldrige/.)

Over three decades, Congress has twice passed legislation enabling expansion of Baldrige Award eligibility to U.S. organizations beyond for-profit businesses: first to health care and education organizations and then to nonprofits, including government organizations at federal, state and local levels.

Since 2007, four government organizations have demonstrated the relevance and performance-related benefits of using the framework and earning Baldrige Awards. Two of those organizations are subunits of federal government organizations, the U.S. Army Armament Research, Development and Engineering Center and VA Cooperative Studies Program Clinical Research Pharmacy Coordinating Center.

Evaluator and Ambassador of Excellence

ICS Director Eric Malloy arrived to the Office of Finance and Planning in 2010. He has been applying his extensive knowledge of the Baldrige framework and assessment process to enhance NCA’s methods of evaluating compliance and performance in its component organizations. Malloy is a seasoned Baldrige examiner with alumni status. Alumni

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Defunding what does not work does not always make sense.

It is appealing and sometimes justified to defund programs that do not work. This is a strong reason to use evidence, especially to counteract political forces encouraging a failing status quo. Yet we should understand that if a government program does not work, the problem the program was intended to address likely still exists. If the problem itself is serious, we should be cautious about prematurely removing funding from programs that do not work before going through a performance improvement journey to try to locate new approaches, or evidence about positive outliers, that might produce improvement.

Evidence-based government is a good thing, and clearly better than the alternative. But, we should try to do evidence right to achieve the most learning and on-the-ground benefits with the fewest costs.

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