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

BALDRIGE
Performance Excellence Program

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

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.

Shelley Metzenbaum is a good government catalyst, consultant and senior fellow at the Volcker Alliance, where she previously served as its founding president. Previously, she led the Obama administration's efforts to improve federal program performance as associate director for performance and personnel management at the U.S. Office of Management and Budget. She can be reached at smetzenbaum@outlook.com.

Steven Kelman, the Weatherhead professor of public management at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government, is the author of many books and articles on the policymaking process and improving the management of government organizations. From 1993 to 1997, Kelman served as administrator of OMB's Office of Federal Procurement Policy. A fellow of the National Academy of Public Administration, he can be reached at Steve_Kelman@hks.harvard.edu.

BALDRIGE FRAMEWORK

examiners have served for at least six years as trained volunteers on the cross-sector teams that conduct assessments of award applicants' performance against the criteria for performance excellence. Like every Baldrige examiner, he receives annual training prior to launch of the national award process each Summer.

When I talked to Malloy about his organization's use of the Baldrige framework, he explained how it is embedded in ICS' structure and key programs focused on improvement, compliance, internal controls and risk management. One is the Organizational Assessment and Improvement (OAI), a formal program led by ICS staff that deploys teams of trained reviewers from across NCA to review NCA cemeteries and service level offices.

Launched in 2004, OAI was redesigned last year, with Malloy leading the effort. The framework portion of the program is based on a facilitated discussion approach. Like Baldrige examiner teams, OAI review teams are composed of individuals from outside the sites they evaluate, trained by Malloy and his staff. Last month, Malloy and other evaluation leads were involved in reviewing a main NCA cemetery with seven satellite cemeteries over the course of a week. The complex will receive a final report describing strengths and opportunities for improvement in its performance. Every year, Malloy's office reviews all such assessments to identify national themes and foster continuous improvement.

Malloy reported that many of NCA's operational measures align with the key drivers of customer satisfaction. These are cemetery appearance, customer service and access to information. Aligning customer needs and operational measures helps focus the workforce on providing excellent service to veterans and their families. As a result, NCA's customer satisfaction scores are consistently high. On the American Customer Satisfaction Index, NCA has the highest score of any organization, public or private. Its most recent score was 96 percent.

Christine Schaefer is a staff member of the federal Baldrige Performance Excellence Program, leading the team that manages publications, communications, the Baldrige Award process and other assessments, and training. She has a bachelor's degree from the University of Virginia and a master's degree from Georgetown University. She can be reached at christine.schaefer@nist.gov.