



Paying Forward: The Baldrige Multiplier Effect

by Darin Atteberry
City Manager, City of Fort Collins

Several years ago, I was reading an article in *Fast Company* magazine that asked notable people what they had learned from their professional mentors. One person said their mentor taught them to ask the question, “What’s the one thing you believe that no one else believes?” Immediately I knew that my own answer to that question is: local government can be great.

Sadly, that’s not a belief shared by many people today, but in Fort Collins we absolutely believe it’s true. However, a great government that consistently delivers exceptional community services rarely just happens organically. Even the most well-intentioned organization, filled with the most skilled and dedicated staff, needs a framework in order to consistently achieve systemic, replicable results. Baldrige is that framework.

Fort Collins was an award-winning community before we embarked on this journey nearly a decade ago, but we didn’t know just how much we didn’t know. The Baldrige Excellence Framework has helped us to

clarify our goals, ask ourselves the hard questions, and as a result, significantly raise the bar.

We first began using the Baldrige Excellence Framework in 2010 and applied for state-level review of our practices in 2011. Over the next four years, we worked to improve, eventually achieving the highest tier of the state performance excellence program. In 2016 we earned our first site visit from Baldrige examiners, and in 2017 became just the third city to be named a Baldrige recipient—seven years after beginning the journey.

Through those years, however, we received valuable feedback about areas in which the City was performing well and opportunities for improvement; feedback that shaped our understanding of what it takes to be a high-performing organization. As we continued to improve our systems and processes, those efforts began to evolve the City into a process-driven, innovation-minded, and employee-empowered organization.

One of the questions the examiners asked us early on was about our strategic planning process. We handed them our long-range city planning document, which they informed us was not, in fact, a strategic plan. And they were right. That one question drove us to systematically develop a central strategic plan and process. We went from stacks of project and master plans, to a true strategic plan that informs everything we do.

And that’s what this journey is really all about—being able to continuously improve our services and operations and measure that improvement. Local governments do not sell widgets; and while we have a bottom line, success is often a subjective term for our communities. For one person, success means that their street is pothole-free and clean water flows from their faucets. For others, success means advancing the community’s energy goals or building out high-speed broadband to every house in Fort Collins.



Darin Atteberry, Fort Collins City Manager, shares what his team has learned during their Baldrige journey. Sharing of best practices is an integral part of the Baldrige experience and a key aspect of the transformative power of Baldrige.

That very subjectivity among our community members requires that we be focused and aligned within the City organization in order to achieve our objectives.

Our strategy includes three steps:

- Clarifying the Vision: elected officials, the community, and staff are on the same page about where we want to go and prioritize our objectives.
- Aligning Resources: our budget process objectively allocates resources to operationalize programs, with every program and initiative tied to one or more strategic objective.
- Creating Systems: to measure, track, and support these processes going forward, through metrics, performance dashboards, and knowledge transfer.



Wade Troxell (Right), the Mayor of Fort Collins, with Darin Atteberry, City Manager of Fort Collins, after being presented with the 2017 Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award.

“As a Baldrige recipient, it has been my joy to share what we’ve learned and help other municipalities and organizations as they embark on their journey. I take seriously the responsibility and privilege to share Fort Collins’ experiences with other city governments. The mentoring we received along the way was invaluable, and I hope to offer that to other communities as well.”

It takes deliberate work to align these three steps, and the Baldrige Framework helped us understand how crucial they are to ensure successful operations and provide world-class community services. It can be overwhelming to consider examining everything your organization does; even more to consider changing it. This is why I believe it is vital to have mentors through this process. The person who first introduced me to Baldrige was Rulon Stacey, former President and CEO of 2008 Baldrige Award recipient Poudre Valley Health System. He is the one who showed me how the Framework shaped their organization—to the point of deeply believing that their Baldrige journey helped save lives—and inspired me to explore how that rigorous evaluation could positively affect a community when applied to local government.

Now, as a Baldrige recipient, it has been my joy to share what we’ve learned and help other municipalities and organizations as they embark on their journey. I take seriously the responsibility and privilege to share Fort Collins’ experiences with other city governments. The mentoring we received along the way was invaluable, and I hope to offer that to other communities as well.

At the highest level, this multi-year process was not about receiving the Baldrige designation or any other award. It’s about getting better. And that starts with the fundamental belief that improvement is a good thing.

Local government can be great. The cumulative impact of this organization continually improving the way we do business makes a tangible difference in our residents’ lives every time they drive on our roads or take a sip of water.

I wholeheartedly believe that for an organization to achieve its vision, it must continually evaluate and improve the work it does. A critical component of any evaluation is an outside perspective. In my decades with local government, I have not come across many comprehensive, standardized, and nationally recognized evaluation systems. And so, when asked “Why Baldrige?” my answer is always the same: if not Baldrige, then what?