



AARP's Baldrige Journey: A Quest for Excellence

by Jo Ann Jenkins
CEO, AARP

With nearly 38 million members; 2,300 staff members; 60,000 volunteers and offices in every state, Washington, D.C., Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands, AARP is the nation's largest nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to serving the needs and interests of people 50 and older and their families.

Since our founding in 1958, AARP has been serving our members and society as a whole by creating positive social change through advocacy, service, and information. The drive, innovation, and compassion of our founder, Dr. Ethel Percy Andrus, continue to inspire our work as we dedicate ourselves to improving lives, standing up to injustice, and transforming the marketplace, empowering people to choose how they live as they age.

The Need to Transform

When I became CEO in 2014, I inherited a highly successful organization. We were financially very strong, we had 37 million members, and our brand was iconic. On top of that, 10,000 people were turning 65 every day—a trend that would continue for the next 16 years. We also recognized, however, that technology was changing our society very rapidly, and the way people were aging was changing. So, if we were to remain relevant to our members, we would have to change, too. Put simply: Doing the things that made us successful in the past would not necessarily make us successful in the future.

We had to adapt our business model to be ready to meet our members' needs and play an indispensable role in their lives, not just today, but also in the future. And, we had to champion more sustainable, accessible, and affordable solutions for health security, financial resilience, and meaningful connections to help people 50-plus navigate their life transitions—whether it is striving to adapt to new technologies, staying employed, becoming a caregiver, or facing a chronic health condition.

Combined, four profound changes—the demographics of our aging society (particularly increased longevity), changing consumer expectations, innovations in technology, and the added health, financial, and social challenges people face as they age—were all contributing to an urgent need to transform what we do and how we do it.

I told our employees we have a choice: "We can continue down the current path and do well for the next 3 to 5 years, or we can take the necessary steps today to make sure AARP is here in 10 years, in 30 years, in 60 years. The first has us playing not to lose—the second has us playing to win."



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We were playing to win. We were determined to accelerate our impact externally by creating more relevance, more innovation, more influence, and greater impact to achieve our purpose of empowering more people to choose how they live as they age. We turned to the Baldrige Excellence Framework to guide our transformation.

Why Baldrige

I had the good fortune of already going through the Baldrige Fellows program before I became CEO. I found the Baldrige Excellence Framework invaluable as I began to settle into my new role. And, equally, if not more important, by going through the program, I gained some valuable insights about myself and my leadership strengths and challenges that have helped me become the kind of leader I want to be and an organization like AARP needs.

My predecessor, Barry Rand, was also a Baldrige Fellow. Prior to joining AARP, he had led Xerox's effort to win the Malcolm Baldrige Quality Award in 1989 and again in 1997. In fact, he was the one who encouraged me to go through the program. At the time, I was President of AARP Foundation, and I used Baldrige to guide our transformation of AARP Foundation. Additionally, several other members of our Executive Team were Baldrige Fellows, so we could learn and apply Baldrige values and principles at AARP.

In fact, prior to applying for the Baldrige National Quality Award in 2020, we had applied much of the Baldrige Framework in designing and implementing the significant changes we have made in our structure, offerings, and operations over the previous five and a half years.

The Executive Team and I are dedicated to continually making AARP better, and we viewed applying for the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award as an important part of that process. It demonstrates our ongoing commitment to performance excellence.

The value of the Baldrige Framework is that it is comprised of leadership and management practices that improve the performance of organizations across multiple sectors. As such, we believed that the seven categories of the Baldrige criteria—(1) Leadership; (2) Strategy; (3) Customers; (4) Measurement, Analysis, and Knowledge Management; (5) Workforce; (6) Operations; and (7) Results—provide an excellent framework for guiding transformational change in a mission-driven organization like AARP.

In addition, we saw Baldrige as an opportunity for us to be evaluated against the highest standards of performance excellence, to identify our strengths, and to prepare for the challenges ahead. We also saw it as valuable tool for developing leaders and increasing employee engagement in our mission to empower people to choose how they live as they age.

The application process is not easy either to learn or to implement. In fact, it is difficult, time consuming, and requires an organization-wide commitment. But in the end, it is extremely valuable for any organization undertaking a transformation or seeking to improve their operations to achieve better results.

Impact

The changes we have made by following the Baldrige criteria to transform AARP have dramatically improved



AARP CEO Jo Ann Jenkins celebrates with staff.

our ability to address issues that our members and people 50-plus care about—those related to financial resilience, health security, social connectedness, and ageism.

For example, we made a significant investment in upgrading our IT to develop connectivity essential for collaboration, agility, and knowledge management, while giving employees the ability to work from anywhere at any time. This proved to be invaluable as we helped our members confront the challenges brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. Because we started this transformation long before COVID hit, we were able to transition to a virtual work environment without missing a beat.

We also created AARP Innovation Labs at our National Office to help shape the future of aging, promote healthy aging, support family caregivers, and help older Americans build financial resilience and combat social isolation.

And, our ongoing digital business platform transformation has allowed us to create a much more robust consumer experience.

As a result of all these efforts, many of our core metrics like our First-Term Renewal Rates have risen every year since we began the transformation.

Conclusion

Organizational transformation is a process and a journey. It is not a one-and-done exercise. The Baldrige Excellence Framework gives us model to follow for updating old processes, establishing new ones, and striving for even greater results.