



“I believe in Baldrige and the results we’ve experienced at MESA demonstrate the value. I believe Baldrige can improve any organization in any sector. But as a small businessperson, applying the Baldrige Criteria consistently is the best recipe I know for growth and sustainability.”

Thoughts on Baldrige

by Terry May

I first became aware of the Baldrige Program in early 2002 when I received a copy of the Baldrige Criteria through a mass mailing. Although I may have heard or read about Baldrige prior to that time, I didn’t have any idea what Baldrige was about. As I read through the Criteria booklet, I experienced what I would describe as a revelation. At that time, I had read many books on management and leadership. Each of these provided me with knowledge that helped improve my business, but none gave me the magic formula. The Criteria encapsulated virtually everything I had come to believe was important in building and growing a successful business. And it did it in an organized manner that made sense to me.

The really powerful appeal to Baldrige is that it works for organizations of any size and any sector. So whether you’re a small business or a global business or a nonprofit or education or health care, Baldrige can improve performance to world-class levels.

But here’s the rub. The concepts are simple, but the application is hard. It takes time and perseverance for an organization to adopt the Baldrige Criteria and put them into practice. Although the results are time-tested and proven, many organizations don’t have the patience or the will to get the maximum benefits. This approach isn’t a quick fix.

In our early experience with Baldrige, I often wondered why so few organizations were involved in the program. I understood that preparing an application is challenging and requires extensive effort, but that didn’t explain to me why fewer than 100 applications were submitted each year.

As we went through several application cycles, I often wished the information and the process could be simplified. As an example, the language and terms used in the Criteria are not part of a normal vocabulary or at least what I consider normal. Applying the Criteria within our organization required us to interpret the language into words we understand and can communicate. As I have become more involved with the Baldrige Program, I’ve come to better understand how the Criteria developed and the dedicated professionals who built the program. But as I’ve gained that understanding, I tend to forget how it appears to outsiders and why others can’t see the value I see.

In one sense, the Program has evolved much like an organization applying Baldrige principles. It has become much more sophisticated and complex over time. We now have a Baldrige Enterprise consisting of multiple organizations and individuals with differing opinions and approaches. Applying Baldrige is hard and it always has been hard. But maybe we make it harder than it needs to be. I’ve often thought that Baldrige has a marketing problem. This is a good product, but we don’t seem to be able to build the market. How can we make it more appealing? Should we make it simpler



Terry May talking with Foundation President and CEO Al Faber.

and easier? Can we come up with a more dynamic name like Lean or Six Sigma? These questions tend to get pushed aside when the urgent and immediate challenge is survival and sustainability of the Program.

I believe in Baldrige and the results we've experienced at MESA demonstrate the value. I believe Baldrige can improve any organization in any sector. But as a small businessperson, applying the Baldrige Criteria consistently is the best recipe I know for growth and sustainability.

