



COVID-19—Responding to the Defining Challenge of Our Generation Using Baldrige Principles

by Patrick J. Lawton
Germantown City Administrator

Franklin Delano Roosevelt became the 32nd President of the United States in 1933. With the country at the height of the Great Depression, Roosevelt, during his inaugural speech, issued a powerful call to action for all Americans when he said, “In every dark hour of our national life a leadership of frankness and of vigor has met with that understanding and support of the people themselves which is essential to victory.” With these few words Roosevelt created an environment for success.

“During the past nine months, Germantown has truly put Baldrige-based principles into action. Problems are not roadblocks but opportunities for improvement. In Germantown, necessity has truly been the mother of invention. In this time of crisis, Germantown has demonstrated the courage to act and the commitment to move forward rather than passively accepting the present circumstance.”

As the world continues to manage through the operational risks and challenges resulting from COVID-19, it brings to mind the extreme sacrifices made by the men and women of the Greatest Generation, who lived through the Great Depression and went on to defeat the Axis Powers in World War II. There were no stimulus checks for these Americans. But what they did have was a deep understanding of the great challenges before them and a national commitment to succeed and never give up hope. While they were far from perfect and many societal issues were left unaddressed, this generation understood that the enemy was at the gates and failure was not an option.

Fast forward more than 80 years and many historians are calling COVID-19 the current generation’s greatest challenge. Will today’s men and women rise to the occasion and make the special effort required to successfully address the pandemic? Where is the call to action? The Baldrige Excellence Framework encourages acting decisively and with purpose. Within the leadership category, senior leaders are asked to create a focus on action and to manage organizational change by responding quickly and with agility. There is no doubt that COVID-19 has created significant challenges and opportunities on a global scale within every industry.

For Germantown’s senior leadership team, the focus on action from the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis came from words of Admiral James Stockdale, an eight-year prisoner of war during the Vietnam War. Stockdale said, “You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end—which you can never afford to lose—with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be.”

In early March, with Stockdale’s words as a battle cry, City leaders entered a strange new world where life would be forever changed. From the beginning, Germantown’s senior leaders have communicated the brutal facts to employees, emphasizing that no one has immunity to the virus; best efforts are only buying time and, to date, more than a million people have died worldwide. And while several vaccines show promise and have strong footing, effective deployment of the vaccine to the majority of the population is still months away. However, employees were also constantly reminded to never give up hope and that the team will endure together even though members are apart. Germantown will survive, adapt, advance, and thrive.



City of Germantown Mayor Mike Palazolo (Left) and City Administrator Patrick Lawton proudly display the city's 2019 Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award.

Overwhelmed and not sure how to create a focus on action during a crisis, once the brutal facts are clearly communicated and a basis for hope is created, teams can move into problem-solving mode and move the organization forward to tackle the work at hand.

In category six, the Baldrige criteria encourages the use of comparative data and information to support fact-based decision making. As a Baldrige organization, Germantown leaders from the beginning were very clear that all decisions would be made based on hard data and not arbitrary dates. Because COVID-19 is first and foremost a public health crisis, leaders must depend on partners in the health field to provide evidence-based COVID-19 metrics to ensure evidence-based decisions.

As a local government, the City of Germantown is responsible for providing essential city services to customers while protecting health and safety. Successful continuation of City services during 2020 is the direct result of a focus on data from the county health department including virus reproduction rate and hospital capacity, strict contact tracing, and unwavering compliance with public health measures.

Data-driven decisions had an extreme impact on how the City engaged with employees as well. There continues to be a great deal of fear and anxiety surrounding COVID-19. As an employer of choice

with an overall employee engagement score of 86 out of 100 and a community net promoter score of 71, leaders know that the success of the organization is built upon the workforce. Therefore, rather than panic in the wake of the economic slowdown and furlough employees, leaders gathered data to assess the City's current and ongoing fiscal position and adopted a "we are in this together" mentality. In return, employees have developed creative solutions to financial and service-delivery issues and commitment and engagement have soared.

During the past nine months, Germantown has truly put Baldrige-based principles into action. Problems are not roadblocks but opportunities for improvement. In Germantown, necessity has truly been the mother of invention. In this time of crisis, Germantown has demonstrated the courage to act and the commitment to move forward rather than passively accepting the present circumstance.

Martin Luther King, Jr. once said "The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands in times of challenge and controversy." COVID-19 has certainly provided challenge and controversy. The City of Germantown is proud to stand as an example of how continuous improvement can make all of the difference when it comes to success or failure in times of crisis.