

Improving Your System for Improvement

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Last week, my column described briefly how I work with leaders to improve their competencies. We start with a self-assessment of their existing strengths and limitations using 67 different attributes.

Then, based on the role the leader is filling currently (or expects to fill soon), we identify a small number of attributes in which the individual would like to improve over the next year. Sometimes the chosen attributes represent gaps between existing and needed skills. Sometimes an existing strength is chosen for enhancement. We creatively consider options for how the leader might build skills in those specific areas, and we generate a specific plan to accomplish the improvement desired.

So how do we transition from the concept of improving one unique leader's competencies to improving an entire organization's results, processes, and culture?

First, we need a way to ensure that the leader can look at every dimension of the organization's needs. I prefer to use the model that forms the foundation for our nation's highest award for business quality, the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award.

If you've read this column over the past three months, you already know the merits of being familiar with the criteria for the award. If you have not yet investigated the award on your own or talked with me about these criteria, please spend some time on the internet at www.nist.gov/baldrige.

There are seven categories in the business model for the National Quality Award. I think it is healthy for any organization to become familiar with these seven categories and their standards for quality. (Note: If you choose to explore this resource, please know that it will involve some deep reading and thinking. Further, don't be surprised if you have difficulty answering the questions asked in the criteria; most organizations just starting with these criteria typically don't think about many of these questions!)

Within any organization of excellence, there is usually a well-accepted, well-understood, routinely used system for seeking improvement. Without such a system, individuals in an organization will have no choice but to generate improvement randomly.

What do I mean by "random improvement"? Many team members want to provide good work in return for their wages, so they look for ways to improve what they do. When they have suggestions, they offer them to someone, usually their boss. Sometimes the boss agrees and takes action to support the adoption of the improved process. Sometimes, the recommendation is ignored, forgotten, or lost.

How might an organization move from this random improvement process to a more reliable, more consistent system of generating better methods for doing work? The leaders of the organization must cause the organization to consciously adopt a uniform method that everyone is encouraged to use for generating and communicating improvement ideas.

If you don't yet have such a system, start simple. I like a procedure known as "see—do—get—reflect." The results you currently "get" are based on what you currently "do". What you currently "do" is based on how you "see" the inputs coming to you and the desired outcomes expected of you! The key to improvement over time is in the "reflect" step. Here you pause and evaluate what is happening at each phase of the process. If you take the time to reflect, you will find plenty of potential for improvement!

The improvement you discover will yield greater service to your customers, more reliability in your processes, reduced costs, better quality, a more robust culture, and better results over the long haul.

What questions do you have about leadership development? Send Dennis Hooper an email at dennis@buildingfutureleaders.com or leave a message for him at 770-286-2250.