

## MAKING SENSE OF THE *BALDRIGE*

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This is a *work-in-process*. I've been asked to share it by others also trying to make sense of something they are seeing happen around "the *Baldrige*." They like what they see but can't quite connect it into a coherent, meaningful picture that can explain *why* it's happening. And without the meaning that understanding provides, effective collaborative action is impossible.

Specifically, schools are being asked to "buy-in," and totally accept, something called "Baldrige" by significant others who can't clearly tell then what this "thing" is. Baldrige advocates point to classrooms, or school sites [and in only a very few cases districts] where significant and different results are apparent. These "results" are not only test scores, but the way children joyfully take control of their own learning, and teachers creatively find they can meet needs of *all* children, not just some.

What, beyond faith, is the connection between those observable results and a set of paper "criteria for performance excellence" being advocated by business and government? And, oh yes, aren't those "continual improvement" tools and processes that are integral parts of this approach the same ones that used to be called "TQM?" Moreover, with all the pressures on school's today, who's got time and resources to compete for an "Award?"

I'm happy to share some developing answers to those concerns with two caveats. First that, as a *work-in-process*, you are willing to contribute any thoughts this evokes that might improve its value.

Second, that you remain aware of the very specific audience for which it is intended. I have tried to view what's happening through the eye's of a person whose *personal* accountability -- and *professional* survival -- is tied directly to his/her organizational accountability for the actions of a *total* system that each day touches the lives of all of it's community's children. In business they call this system-leader a CEO; in education, a district superintendent. And, as we know, they usually are hired for their visions of how "some day" the system can work better, and fired about 3-4 years later because their visions didn't seem to translate into timely actions that had impact on all the children today.

The following thoughts take that perspective to two levels. The first to 20,000 feet to "get-out-of-the box." The second returns to the ground "under that box" to identify some research-based concepts that seem underlie what's happening in these classrooms, schools and districts. As a result of what is encountered on that journey, this paper leaves us with a challenge. How can the strengths of the processes being called "Baldrige" be used to confront the very conditions that presently serve as barriers to understanding?

Another section, not included here, will address practical, district and community-wide strategies that can provide the missing "sense-making" connections between leadership and learning.

## A View from 20,000 feet

### Something's Missing

People who care about children today, and those who care about how they *must* be to survive tomorrow get excited when they see certain things happening in school systems that say they are “doing” or “using” *Baldrige*. They see “results,” not only test scores but in changed relationships and roles, especially for children and teachers.

Quite naturally this excites them because they would like to see that happen in *all* schools. But when they turn to finding out what is *causing* those effects, they run into an interesting paradox in understanding what people mean when they use term “Baldrige.” As examples:

- At the end of a recent training session on the “Baldrige” a participant stood up and admitted he still wasn’t sure of what the “*this*” is when people say they’re doing “Baldrige”? He noted that answers frequently include “the Baldrige *model*” ... “the Baldrige *process*” ... the Baldrige *system*. NIST calls it a framework of “Education Criteria for Performance Excellence.” And of course, many people continue to think of it as some sort of an *award* for an organization.
- Many Chief State School Officers at their last CCSSO meeting also kept asking “What is *it*?” And specifically, how it might relate to the pressures they are under for “standards,” “assessments,” and “results.”
- Similarly, at a recent meeting of national organizations who have committed to supporting “BIE-IN” [the *Baldrige in Education Initiative*], the participants could not get a clear enough picture of the “*this*” that they were supposed to be supporting. “What does it mean for schools...., for businesses,...for communities? ” Someone from the *Business Roundtable* wondered “- *Why* should we tell our members to be “advocates?” “How is this the same or different from other initiatives that have used the same words?”
- And my own search for understanding “the Baldrige” has taken me from working with NIST’s Curt Reimann and his staff when they were first thinking about the educational relevance of the MBNQA, through training as a [non-education] Baldrige examiner, then to more intensive activities over the past year with issues related to the national launch of BIE-IN. Yet, I still wasn’t sure I could provide a single, coherent definition for the “*this*” that appeared to be causing the obvious effects.

### The X-Factor

Therefore, for the past several months I have been probing this paradox “backwards.” I have been peering through the eyes, minds and hearts of practitioners and observers who seem to have been turned on by *it* ... whatever “*it*” is. As one corporate executive wrote...” I finally got it.”

What I have been seeking is a hidden “*X-factor*.” Why? Because paradoxes always appear when people can’t *make sense* of what they experience in their lives. And solutions to paradoxes usually involve finding something within the situation that isn’t being accounted for -- an unknown logical *X-factor*. It usually involves a principle that was present all along but unknown or unseen to us.

So, I have been working backwards from people’s “*ah-ha*” and “*wow*” experiences. From what Oprah calls “Light bulb Moments” and philosophers call *epiphanies*. And I’ve found these instant discovery moments clustered around what seem to be the two different “ends” of the process. One might think of one as the “*planning*” end, and the other, the “*action*” end. Here’s what I’ve seen and heard.

1- Many of the *ah-ha*’s – epiphanies or new ways of understanding -- came as people used the *Baldrige Education Criteria for Performance Excellence* to structure a scanning process for *self-assessment*. I like to think of them as an organizational CT-scan that can enable its users to “see” and understand how everything connects to “learning” -- i.e., the process within each child, not just the paper tests of the extent to which that capacity has been developed. This last point, which I’ll come back to later, is essential to understanding what is happening (and not happening) at *Baldrige*’s “other end.”

The major *ah-ha*’s at this “end” usually come as people discover their *interconnectedness*, and see in new ways the value of their contribution to what everyone has been independently, and most often unsuccessfully, trying to make happen for all children.

2. At the other end, the *wow's* come as people observe children and adults empowered to play more effective individual and joint roles in the learning-teaching processes. These are true *epiphanies* -- new ways of seeing and understanding -- that come from experiences that challenge fundamental, seldom questioned beliefs ...about students, and about teachers.

For example, most people *don't believe* children want to learn, and can take a responsible role in doing it. And the same people *don't believe* that teachers and administrators will collaboratively do what it takes to meet the needs of children

Here the some of the reactions when people are exposed to sustained experiences that put those beliefs in question. One corporate executive wrote:

*"In all the years I've been involved in education, I never had a classroom visit that affected me like this one. ...what I didn't expect was the degree to which children in first grade understood and embraced these concepts. All day long, I had children at every grade level tell me they were personally responsible for their education; they knew where they stood relative to expected achievement levels, they knew what they needed to accomplish to get to the next level, and they knew what resources were available to help them.*

*...I left [there] believing that if we could get students across the country to feel this sense of personal responsibility for their education, ... we could revolutionize the system and achieve the results that everyone wants.*

Another visitor noted

*"...I certainly saw some of the things I expected to see, such as the value of alignment between the principal and all the teachers, and the importance of clear goals and measurement of progress toward those goals.*

And a teacher in a school noted, *"Now, I know why we're doing what we're doing, and I have access to information that better informs my decisions when I need it."* Another commented on how she now had the *time* she always needed to be a better teacher because the students had taken responsibility for so much of their own learning.

3. But with all this exciting, new knowledge appearing at these two ends of a "process" that carries a common label, there have been few opportunities [possibly till now] to see how they can be *functionally connected*. Why?

It seems as if our ability to tap the power of those two levels of epiphany, which each challenge a common core of educational *disbelief*, is currently blocked by a third, and more fundamental one. For example, one can come away from classroom, or school, applying "Baldrige" thinking and strategies with a new understanding of what is *actually possible* in any classroom and building. We can "see" that children are pre-wired to want to learn, and take a responsible role in doing it; and that teachers and principals will continually change their accustomed practices, and do it collaboratively.

But then we hit a wall. In order to translate what can be done for *some* children to results for *all* children requires coherent district-wide support. And few believe it is *actually possible*. And this has become a case of getting what one *expects*. Because we've never seen it -- and more importantly don't know *why* we haven't -- we don't really expect that a school district can function any differently that it always has. *Controlling* leaders at its "top," *mindless* bureaucrats in its middle, and supposedly-*autonomous* practitioners trying to respond to children's needs miles away in isolated classrooms and principal's offices.

Most attempts at current educational reform seem shaped by an unquestioned assumption that emerges from this belief: *hierarchical organizational structures can't be fixed*. That is, the system of common purpose and potential support called a school district will always be a bureaucracy and therefore must be flattened or by-passed to free-up those individuals who can make more responsive decisions closer to the child.

As the Baldrige program begins to enter the consciousness of educators and those trying to improve schooling, this disbelief poses on of the its greatest challenges... and opportunities. Can its "winners" provide the "Light bulb Moments" that challenge the assumptions that a school district is a "system of schools" that can't be changed *systemically*, and not an already-connected "school system?"

4. One might also observe something happening in the context around those "two ends." Political and business leaders have recognized the extent to which economic and social changes in the world

have created new requirements for the type of student that our schools and communities must develop. It made sense to them to call for seemingly logical strategies [standards and assessments] that would “Raise the Bar” for all students, and simultaneously “Close the Gap” for some. Unfortunately, while “standards” and “assessments” provide an illusion of logic, their already-emerging “darkside” suggests that the “x-factor” is also at work here.

One indicator of the X-factor at work is that standards and assessments advocates are not seeing that in these “*Baldrige*” classrooms, in every case, students are striving for a “bar” that is *different* from the “*content-standards*” bar embedded in state testing. Interestingly, it is the same bar that America’s business community has been saying is the critical portal into personal and national survival in the 21st century. It involves one’s ability to take control of his/her own learning, with effective problem-solving and communication skills, and a capacity to collaborate with others. And this “different bar,” in these schools is being raised for all students, not just those who achieve low on tests.

But the most significant learning that standards advocates could take away from observing these classrooms is that the skills and attitudes developed in reaching this *different* “bar” enable students to close the achievement gaps evident from assessments based upon the content-standards “bars.”

5. A final observation from this 20,000 foot view of school districts and classrooms focuses on apparently common “*how’s*” that seem to be influencing these results. The tools, processes and ways of thinking that are tapping into the inherent drive in children and adults to be effective and make a difference are the “old” ones that used to be called “*tqm*” or “*quality*” tools.

These tools work because they are “*learning-based*.” [Note: We are so used to associating the word “learning” with children that we sometime forget that the adults who work with them have the same requirements.] The tools are designed to help individuals and groups *fix themselves* by better understanding their fit with and relationships to the school’s purposes, and providing them the “data” and support they need to overcome the problems that keep them from effectively accomplishing their, and the school’s, purposes.

The reason they are so effective for both students and adults is that they tap the human brain’s pre-wiring as a purposeful, trial and error, problem-solving meaning-maker. [This is why Deming’s famous PDSA [*Plan, Do, Study, Act*] cycle, which he always credited to Shewhart, actually was credited by Shewhart to John Dewey – the father of learning-from-experience.]

### **A Missing Connection**

During my 20,000 foot scan of the past months, I have found very few cases where the two “ends” of the *Baldrige* have been effectively connected. One can see examples of “good things” happening at one end or the other, but neither seems by itself to suggest how to translate them into sustained *total system* change. Something seems to stand in the way of its own alignment.

Could this be related to the X-factor? If so, it has two dimensions. First, what appears to be an anomaly in our knowledge base about the connected *nature* of learning, teaching, and schooling; and then, because of that, most school systems lack a *connective infrastructure* between the system’s “two ends” that could use that knowledge everyday as they learn from each other and develop an ever-increasing base of shared understanding and knowledge.

I believe now that it is in this basic anomaly that one can find the “x-factor” -- a logical principle that was present all along but unknown or unseen to us. It has to do with learning; the ways it develops through interaction, and the ways it gets applied to difficult situations through interdependent interaction.

I feel a little silly suggesting that “learning” -- the unquestioned reason for schools -- has an unknown or unseen dimension. *Learning* is supposed to be the school’s “product.” Yet, if we stay with that metaphor for a moment, we’d note that the work processes of every organization are structured to address the nature and operating requirements of its “product” - whether it is a widget or a service. But not, we now can see, in education! The core work of the entire organization does not address the requirements determined by the basic nature of each developing mind.

No one is to blame. Only recently, as a consequence of research on the human brain, understanding of *learning* -- the seldom questioned reason why classrooms, schools, and school systems are structured the way they are -- turned around 180°. Learning is now understood as more than accumulated *content*. It is, instead, a *biological capacity* inborn in every child. Learning, we now *know* is a natural process that develops a capacity - a stored capacity to act. This capacity to weave skills and knowledge into effective

actions is driven by a natural will that, if not extinguished in the early years of life, could fuel life long learning.

Education reformers quickly picked up on its implications for schools. The continual development of this learning capacity is schooling's purpose or "end."

Unfortunately, unlike other work settings, these understandings of the nature of the "product" have yet to be related to the everyday *work processes* of schooling. One reason may be that the word "learning" in schools is used interchangeably to mean a process [the learning process] and the outcome measures of that capacity-developing process [what they learned.]

We periodically track the development of that capacity through testing, and use those "results" to inform a variety of decisions that can enhance the continual development of that capacity. Unfortunately, most of the data collected today goes to the least important decision-makers in terms of *timely actionable* results -- decision-makers outside the immediate instructional environment. They aren't intended to be used by those who could modify their own immediate capacity-developing actions.

(An example of a potentially negative consequence of this distinction between learning as a "result" or a "process" can be found in the present *Baldrige's* education criteria. On page. 35 of the Criteria document's presentation of their core beliefs and values one finds:

#### **"Learning-Centered Education**

Learning-centered education places the focus of education on learning and the *real needs* of students. *Such needs* derive from the requirements of the marketplace and the responsibilities of citizenship. "

It would seem that responding to "student needs" should be the core of the process. But focusing on "student needs," is not the same as focusing on the *needs of the learning process*. What they refer to as "student needs" are really needs stakeholders have for the ways they want students to perform. They are indicators of a capacity that developed from the student's learning process. While that is not incorrect, it misses a more basic requirement. The brain's *learning process* itself imposes requirements that are common for *all* children, That this understanding is missing is evident in that same section in the description of

#### **Key characteristics of learning-centered education:**

- understanding that students *may* learn in different ways and at different rates. Also, student learning rates and styles *may* differ over time, and *may* vary depending upon subject matter. Learning *may* be influenced by support, guidance, and climate factors, including factors that contribute to or impede learning.

Note the use of the word "may" to describe what actually are common truths for all. Think about processes, other than learning, necessary for human survival. For example, the nature of the "breathing," and "circulatory" processes create requirements that must be met for the healthy development of a child's lungs and heart. Medical practice, and hospitals, are structured to respond to those *common* requirements. They can deal with individual differences because they continually interact with "standards" developed from this core knowledge of sameness.)

Why is this seemingly quibbling over words important? Because, from 20,000 feet, it seems to be that these *natural requirements of the learning process* are being directly responded to by teaching and management processes in schools using this "*Baldrige* approach."

#### **Interaction speaks louder than words**

Once one begins to see these natural, and universal, requirements of the learning process as the X-Factor, something else going on "down there." becomes understandable. The same brain research about *learning* as an "end," also contributed a related understanding about "*means*." The single concept emerging from brain research and neuroscience about how the human brain develops and continues to increase this capacity throughout life is that this result we call "learning" is the product of *interaction*. While this was not new information to anyone close to teaching -- effective teaching has always been a process based upon managing interactions appropriate to the needs of *each* child -- it provides a key knowledge bridge for linking what have been thought of as "quality management tools" to the organizational reform of schools.

Consider that, in any field of human endeavor, it is *informed interaction* between the “worker” and the object of the work that engages the human mind’s natural trial and error way of solving problems and achieving purposes. At the “end” of that process, the “quality of results” -- the match between intentions and outcomes, between needs and results -- is directly dependent upon the frequency of that interaction and its appropriateness. And “appropriateness” is shaped by the knowledge that informs it.

Industry calls that critical, quality-producing interaction the “*moment-of-truth*” -- the choices made by the last person in the “line” that fulfill or diminish all those decisions from “above” that went before. In medicine they call this type of informed interaction “sound diagnostic/prescriptive” health care. In education, it’s known as the essence of good “teaching.”

Yet, with this knowledge of the power of interaction from both research and experiences in non-school settings, why have most school systems not yet been able to take advantage of these understandings to support the continual interactions of teaching and learning’s *moments-of-truth*. From 20,000 feet it seems to be that in education the responsibility for the quality and quantity of that interaction has been placed primarily on *one person* -- a teacher. (Here, too, we find ourselves caught in the distinction between a *process* and a person’s actions. In this case, teaching as a process, and the unique acts of a teacher in that process. It rocks the under-the-ground world of unquestioned assumptions to suggest that a “teacher” and the “teaching process” are not the same thing. But, unfortunately when one believes they are, then the primary way to fix teaching is limited to fixing teachers)

Consider, however, that in other professions, such as health care, the *organization* is held accountable for outcomes of the core process. To fulfill that accountability, work is structured to sustain the *informed interaction* supporting those moments-of-truth. The organization’s flow of information informs that interaction, and time and tools are provided to support the process’s *interactivity*. In these other organizations, results become a *shared responsibility*. Individuals are held *accountable* for creating, managing and sustaining the processes for achieving them. This shared accountability can be thought of as co-management.

More significantly, other professions themselves support this different concept of accountability because they recognize that the core work that defines one as a “professional” [think nurse, doctor, lawyer...] is structured around interactivity. In fact a Texas judge recently banned sales of a do-it-yourself legal software package [Quicken Family Lawyer 99] because it “ventured into the unauthorized practice of law.” The reason: its interactivity.

Yet, as most schools address “accountability” today, the person at education’s end point -- where the “system” interacts with the child -- is expected to be accountable as an isolated practitioner. Interestingly, no one expects a hospital staff member to function without the organization providing the means to continually monitor and do something about his or her effects on a patient. The hospital, as a total organization, is held accountable for informing and supporting the interactions the individual doctor or nurse manages or contributes to.

### **Back on the ground**

Probing the “*ah-has*” at both ends seems to have led me to what I was looking for. First, an *x-factor* -- a logical principle that was present all along but unknown or unseen, and second, a sense of how the processes subsumed under the Baldrige relate to those logical principles. Basically, the *Baldrige* processes empower the human psychological need for interaction from which to learn, and the social need for interdependent interaction [collaboration] from which to solve the difficult problems that block accomplishment of mutual goals.

But what can be done with this insight back-on-the-ground to bringing this shift in understanding of schooling as an *interdependent work process* -- and teachers’ and leaders’ unique contributions to it? The answers developed by current *Baldrige* advocates may be one of the major contributions to changing the culture in which school practitioners do their work.

The challenge is that at this point in its application to schools, a structure or infrastructure that connects *teaching-as-a-process* to *learning-as-a-process* is still missing. The question now is how this thing called “*Baldrige*” can serve to create a way of *thinking* and interacting that can enable a school

system to make a difference in results for *all* children by enabling its people to make a difference in the results for *each*.

### **Factoring the X into Baldrige**

Where does the Baldrige fit into this situation? Where does the X-Factor fit into Baldrige? Here are some initial thoughts.

- Based upon a common set of *beliefs* and *values* about people and their needs when they organize to accomplish common purposes, the Baldrige offers tools and processes for looking at and understanding how the process of governing, teaching and learning fit together to produce their intended results. It can provide a frame for *thinking* and *acting*.
- This wider frame around the work of schooling offers a view of school systems as more coherent wholes and makes it possible to see different possibilities for different actions that can have more systemic and sustainable effects.
- But *thinking* and *acting* are not separate processes. There has to be a way to more directly connect these two dimensions of daily decisions so they are served by the structure of a school district's regular work process. Once all can see the scope and nature of the basic interactions that produce the organization's results, there have to be ways to *support* their *continual, interactive connectedness* in accomplishing them for *all* children...*everyday*..

It is clearly within the realm of both theory and practice, that school system could develop the "missing" process connector that could provide them with a capacity to break through the disconnects of isolated practice with processes that grow from a coherent logic.

1. We now know that all human beings construct their knowledge and sense of meaning through *interactions* with the world around them.

2. Good teaching, management and leadership provides an environment of information/data and ways to use it that can inform and help manage that interaction, allowing an individual to learn from the consequences of his/her acts.

3. Quality tools and processes can enable people to create and manage environments where others must *learn from their own work*. In education, these key managers of learning capacity-development are teachers, principals, superintendents,... and students.

This new form of school district support would enable:

- students and teachers to *co-manage* their learning processes.
- a school system and its staff to support and share *accountability* for *co-managing* the teaching process, and
- a community and school district to *co-manage* a schooling process that aligns community-wide resources to the interest of learning.

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[The next section of this *In-Process* think piece addresses how a school district could leverage the *Baldrige* processes to develop an *Integrated Learning Management System* -- an infrastructure, or *scaffold*, that would support its continual improvement from the *inside-out*. This infrastructure would be driven by each person's *intrinsic* need to continually improve capacities to make a difference for children, rather than by the *extrinsic* pressures that present conflicting demands for "change."]