

KEEPING YOU INFORMED
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Enjoy Your Journey

Every organization is on a journey

Every organization is on a journey. They may not describe their journey in much detail, or pay too much attention to how they are progressing in it. But nonetheless, every organization is on a journey. Think about the various organizations that you have been employed by, or perhaps served as a consultant or a contractor. How did these organizations describe their journey?

Many organizations describe their journey as an ultimate or preferred destination. For example, an organization may state that they are on a quest to become a market leader, or be recognized as best-in-class within their industry, or become the preferred provider for the products and services they offer. Other organizations may declare that they don't want to be the biggest, but instead they want to be the best at what they do. Still others express that they want to achieve extraordinary growth and profits for their shareholders, or be recognized as a leader by their peers. At the other extreme, some organizations don't bother to communicate this information at all.

Thus far, we are describing what most organizations do. But what do high-performing organizations do? To find out, there are three specific questions we need to answer: 1.) How do they describe their journey? 2.) How do they pursue their journey? 3.) What is the day-to-day experience of their journey really like for these organizations?

How high-performing organizations describe their journey

As a member of the Board of Examiners for both the Baldrige Performance Excellence Program and the Quality Texas Foundation for many years, I have had the opportunity to examine a number of high-performing organizations applying for either a Baldrige or Texas Award. Through this experience, I have had the opportunity to learn the answers to these questions first hand. The answers may not be what you think they are.

Most of these organizations will tell you that they were initially attracted to the idea of winning an award. Winning an award holds a lot of allure. After all, it is the highest level of recognition that a U.S.-based organization can receive for performance excellence. But the fact is, only 6% of all applicants ultimately win an award at the national level.

After organizations pursue an award for a while, their attitude about winning an award usually shifts. They learn that the Baldrige process is not really about a race to win an award. Instead, they come to understand that it is really about a journey to performance excellence.

When an organization commits to a long-term, ongoing journey to performance excellence, their focus shifts to learning how to transform their organizational culture and continuously improve their performance management system in order to achieve and sustain performance excellence. The real benefit is engaging the organization in an ongoing process to undergo an annual assessment to obtain objective, actionable feedback based on non-prescriptive criteria, and learn how to achieve and sustain performance excellence. Winning an award becomes secondary. This shift in focus is subtle, but very powerful.

How high-performing organizations pursue their journey, and what the experience is like

But how do high-performing organizations pursue their journey to excellence, and how do people in these organizations actually experience being on the journey?

Let's first consider how this plays out in an average performing organization. At the outset, the leadership team tends to under-estimate and under-appreciate the importance of creating a journey that is shared by everyone in the organization. Although they may be personally committed to organizational success, these leaders often unintentionally and/or unknowingly create a journey that does not interest, inspire, engage or motivate people.

Leaders conduct a kick-off meeting, followed by an occasional employee newsletter and perhaps a training program. Individuals and departments begin receiving a series of projects, deadlines and milestones that must be managed in addition to their regular jobs. Projects are presented as new requirements coming down from top management, with little fanfare or explanation other than "it's time for everyone to step up." Senior leaders are usually not very visible to the organization's operations. Progress on the journey is not regularly communicated, so it's difficult for most people to feel a sense of forward movement or accomplishment. More often than not, there is little recognition or appreciation for the discretionary effort and energy that is required to achieve higher levels of performance. As a result, people don't feel like they are a part of the journey, and either quietly comply with what is required, or simply tune out until the next new initiative.

Contrast that approach with how the leadership team of a high-performing organization pursues their journey. These leaders intentionally create a journey that is interesting, inspiring, engaging, and motivating. They craft a transformation plan. They frame the journey as long-term, ongoing journey of learning and continuous improvement that will help the organization achieve performance excellence for the benefit of all stakeholders, not just leaders and investors.

They involve key people from all parts of the organization right from the start. They evaluate the time, financial and human resources that are realistically required to support high performance. They identify new skills that are required, and develop new training programs and career opportunities. They develop processes to regularly communicate progress, and ensure that two-way feedback takes place with all key stakeholders. They also develop meaningful ways to recognize and celebrate the accomplishments of individuals, teams and the overall organization.

Leadership ensures that everyone in the organization understands the purpose of the journey; has a picture in their minds of what the outcomes will be like, and what the benefits will be; knows what the plans are, and what their current status is; and understands what part they play in these plans, including what their personal contributions are, and how they make a difference.

As a result, the day-to-day experience of stakeholders such as employees, customers, and suppliers is much more interesting, inspiring, engaging, motivating and, yes, even fun!

I hope this article has stimulated your thinking, and provided you with some actionable ideas about how you can make your organization's journey to performance excellence more effective. Enjoy your journey!

Our mission is facilitating organizational transformation and performance improvement. If you would like to learn more about you can create a journey to performance excellence for your organization, or discuss other aspects of organizational transformation and performance improvement, please contact us. © 2013 by Jeffrey H. Bracken, Bracken and Associates. All rights reserved.