

Exploring the Synergies between Teaching and Consulting: The Baldrige National Quality Award Experience

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CONSULTING PROCESS

ABSTRACT

Many articles have been written on the Baldrige criteria and its success in improving organizational performance in various sectors of the economy. What is not as well discussed is the impact of the Baldrige Award experience on teaching and learning. The main objectives of this paper are to illustrate the impact of Baldrige consulting with specific cases, and to identify some of the success factors required to increase the likelihood that these synergies will be derived. To accomplish these objectives, a case study approach has been used to gather knowledge and address the research question.

Keywords: Baldrige Award Criteria

INTRODUCTION

Engaging and interacting with the business community and keeping up with the practice of management is expected of faculty in business schools accredited by Association for Advancement of Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) [1]. One of the forms in which this engagement takes place is through consulting activity. Some legitimate questions that arise in relation to this type of engagement and interaction with industry include: Are there synergies between consulting and teaching that benefit students? Can consulting serve as a conduit for bringing the real world into the classroom? Under what conditions can consulting complement teaching and enable knowledge attainment that are not available through textbooks? These questions gain saliency as business schools strive to keep their curricula relevant and current [2]. This paper offers some answers to these questions through the lens of a particular type of consulting experience (i.e., serving as an examiner for the national and state performance excellence awards).

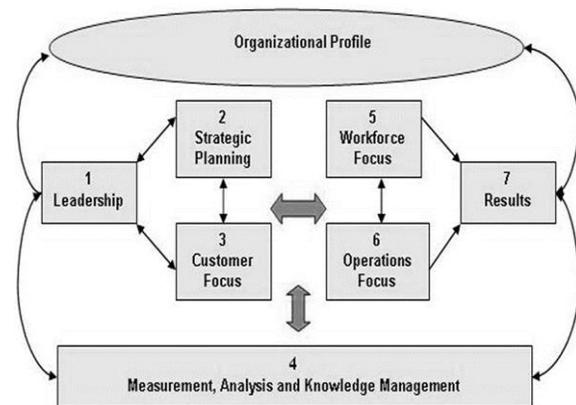
BACKGROUND, ACADEMIC INTERESTS AND RELEVANT CONSULTING EXPERIENCE

The author's academic background is in the areas of management science and operations management while the research, teaching and consulting interests are in the areas of organizational quality and performance management.

The author has served as an examiner (three times) for the Baldrige National Quality Award and the Tennessee Center for Performance Excellence (TNCPE) Award (three times). Information about the history of these award programs, objectives, criteria, award process, and benefits to the participating organizations in terms of improving their capabilities and practices and strengthening the competitiveness of the U.S. and Tennessee economies are available at [3] and [4].

In both Baldrige and TNCPE award processes, examiners - volunteers who are not compensated - go through rigorous training in applying a proven framework (i.e., the Baldrige performance excellence criteria). This criteria emphasizes systems perspective, as well as the linkages, alignment, and integration between the constituent elements. The criteria framework is given below [3].

Figure 1. Baldrige performance criteria framework



The participating organization must document how it identifies and meets its performance requirements by designing and implementing systems for leadership; strategic planning; customer focus; measurement analysis and knowledge management; human resources; operations/process management. Leadership is the driver of these systems. These systems acting together produce results (relative to the performance requirements) which are measured by a balanced composite of financial and non-financial aspects of performance. Organizations have to address in their application, the following. *Leadership*: How upper management leads the organization, and how the organization leads within the community. *Strategic planning*: How the organization establishes and plans to implement strategic directions. *Customer and market focus*: How the organization builds and maintains strong, lasting relationships with customers. *Measurement, analysis, and knowledge management*: How the organization uses data to support key processes and manage performance. *Human resource focus*: How the organization empowers and involves its workforce. *Process management*: How the organization designs, manages and improves key processes. *Business/organizational performance results*: How the organization performs in terms of customer satisfaction, finances, human resources, supplier and partner

performance, operations, governance and social responsibility, and how the organization compares to its competitors and other benchmarks.

The organization is also required to provide descriptions of the organizational background and context. In the Organizational Profile, an organization describes its: 1) operating environment; key relationships with customers; suppliers and partners; 2) strategic situation in terms of competitive environment; strategic advantages and disadvantages; and 3) performance improvement system.

Examiners who are professionals with diverse backgrounds and experiences, evaluate the information provided by applying the criteria, first individually, and then as a team, and score the applications. Based on the scores they receive, some organizations are then selected for site visits. The purpose of the site visit is to verify and clarify the issues that arose during the first round of evaluation. The award winners are selected by a panel of judges who consider the recommendations of the examiners. All organizations that apply for the award are given written, criteria-specific feedback in terms of their areas of strength, best practices and opportunities for improvements. Thus, in one sense, organizations receive free consulting services.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN AWARD PROGRAM CONSULTING AND TRADITIONAL CONSULTING

Important differences between the consulting that is provided by the award process and commercial consulting exist. These differences have implications for synergies with teaching and learning.

1. The Baldrige and TNCPE examiners are volunteers drawn from a wide range of industries and organizations. The participation by organizations is also voluntary. There is no contractual relationship between the Baldrige program or the TNCPE program and the participating organizations.
2. The scope is organization wide, and not limited to a function, business unit or department in the organization. Traditional consulting focuses on solving specific organizational problems, and therefore, is inherently limited in its organizational scope.
3. In the Baldrige or state award processes, organizations that participate are motivated by a desire to improve. Commercial consultants on the other hand are sometimes brought in to serve the open/hidden agenda of the senior leaders.
4. The examiners are screened for any conflict of interest pertaining to the organization. By a signed agreement, the examiners are prohibited from: disclosing the name of the organization whose application they evaluate; contacting the organization or have a commercial consulting relationship with the organization for at least 3-5 years after they serve as an examiner. Therefore, considerations of getting “repeat business.” do not arise. The examiners work for the award program and not for themselves.
5. The criteria are non-prescriptive in terms of tools, technologies, disciplines, and methods. Traditional consulting involves the use of - and in some cases the promotion of - specific tools and methodologies. The prescriptive nature of traditional consulting often limits the scope of evaluating the organizational performance because the tools and technologies that are prescribed may not be relevant or linked to the organizational context and to all

aspects of organizational performance. It can lead to situations where, “the tail wags the dog” i.e., the expertise of consultants in the application of specific tools determines how the problems will be framed or defined and solved

In recent years, the criteria framework is also being deployed in other ways. Many consulting organizations are including in their service portfolio, services such as helping their client organizations in doing self-assessments as well as in the writing of the application [5].

SYNERGIES

Synergies can be achieved in teaching and learning relating to the following topics.

1. Linking organizational performance concepts to discipline knowledge.
2. Systems thinking.
3. Understanding the drivers of linkages between disciplines.
4. Experiential learning.
5. Continuous improvement strategies.
6. Understanding innovation as a new dimension of performance.

FACTORS THAT PROMOTE SYNERGIES

1. Having experiential component in the curriculum will help. For example, students can discuss aspects of performance they have actually experienced as customers of hospitals, cellphone and internet providers, retail stores, and restaurants.
2. Consulting that is based on a framework that is logically consistent, comprehensive and theory driven. The Baldrige criteria is a great example of a holistic approach. It is not compliance or checklist oriented and it is not prescriptive. Having these characteristics in consulting is important because consulting is often tool and checklist driven (e.g., BCG Matrix, Porter’s Five Forces Model,...) and these tools are indiscriminately applied to all situations. If consulting involves checking a number of boxes then few insights can be incorporated into teaching.
3. Selecting the appropriate contexts is important. What theory works and when it does/does not work depends on the consulting context. The consulting context is defined by the nature of performance requirements and the organizational problems consultants are trying to solve. The organizational context and the performance requirements should drive the choice of the tools and methods. Students need to understand the contextual factors and avoid one-size-fits-all thinking in designing solutions.
4. Analysis and implementation. Consultants usually provide analysis but often do not get involved in implementation. Consulting experiences with implementation will add value to teaching.
5. Industry-specific aspects. Consulting that acknowledges industry-specific aspects (e.g., industries that are highly regulated such as healthcare, industries with economies of scale such as steel and bulk chemicals etc.) extend and enrich students’ knowledge and understanding of the nuances of the industry and their impact on strategy and performance.
6. Country and culture- specific aspects. Consulting that addresses country and culture specific aspects allows discussion of laws, institutions and social norms on

organizational practices and performance. Such opportunities arise in the context of consulting for companies with global markets and operations.

REALIZING THE SYNERGIES

It is instructive to compare the Baldrige award with other awards such as the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM) Excellence Award in terms of realizing the above synergies [6]. The Baldrige Award which was created in 1987, precedes the EFQM award by five years and in fact, the criteria for EFQM was based on the Baldrige criteria. Many national quality awards which were Baldrige-based were created in the years that followed. Therefore, as long as the award criteria share with the Baldrige criteria similar characteristics they enable the realization of synergies 1, 2, 3 and 5. It must be noted that EFQM model does not explicitly consider innovation (synergy #6) as a performance dimension as the Baldrige model does. Realizing the synergy of experiential learning (#4) is not tied to a particular characteristic of the criteria of any award. Its realization depends on how the criteria is used. The partnership between TNCPE and College of Business allows students to serve as examiners, thus creating an experiential learning opportunity for the student to apply the criteria to improve the performance of real organizations.

The following are examples from the College of Business at Tennessee Technological University which is in a unique position to realize the synergies.

1. In a MBA course where the students served as consultants to the local organizations, the students developed the Organizational Profile and used it as a diagnostic tool [7].
2. An undergraduate elective course on quality and productivity taught by the author emphasized performance excellence concepts using Baldrige criteria and case studies. A number of teaching materials including textbooks, Baldrige examiner training cases, and applications of award winning companies are now available for incorporating these concepts and experiences into the curriculum [3, 8, 9].
3. The Mayberry Lecture series in the College of Business focuses on performance excellence in organizations. Speakers are experienced in implementing performance excellence concepts. The link to the video of the 2015 lecture on “Achieving Performance Excellence in Software Industry” is given in [10].
4. Perhaps the most effective way to realize the synergies is for students themselves to serve as examiners. The College of Business through its partnership with TNCPE, provides the opportunity for its MBA students to serve as examiners and earn elective academic credit for it. The following excerpts from the reports that students have to submit for the course after serving as examiners, indicate that by and large, the synergies have been achieved.
 - a. “MBA studies gave me some knowledge but not as much an integrated approach to business and to decisions as is emphasized by the criteria. The MBA education wasn’t necessarily intended to be like silos, but it seems that it ended up that way. Core classes were taught with little to no discussion of how each course relates to the other. Each course was and will be useful/valuable, but they each “stood alone”. TNCPE helped me to understand where leadership fits into a company, how interrelated the categories are, and how long it can take to become a role model company. I learned about the components that make up a successful company. I learned about the process that a company goes through to examine and evaluate itself, and how outside evaluation can help. I learned about the breadth and depth of the topics that relate to a business (approaches and deployment). I learned how important it is to continue to learn and make improvements from the findings. I learned about having consistency across business divisions and departments.”
 - b. “My experience as an examiner was closely related to the MBA program at Tennessee Tech. One of the key processes taught in the MBA program is teamwork. Almost every graduate level course requires the students to work together in teams of varying opinions and personalities. This process helps students learn how to formulate their individual opinions while developing the overall group consensus. As such, I feel that I was prepared for the amount of teamwork involved throughout the experience. By combining various teamwork methods learned from both graduate school and the TNCPE, I was able to fulfill my duties as an examiner in a timely, efficient manner. Generally speaking, my experience with the TNCPE was complementary to the MBA program. However, my role as an examiner helped me identify and develop an overall systems perspective that was slightly different and more functional than that offered in the MBA program. As a student, I have taken nearly every subject concerning today’s businesses climate such as finance, accounting, operations, and marketing. While these areas were also addressed individually as an examiner, I was able to get a better feel for the “overall” systematic process and how each division may affect the others, both positively and negatively, and how vital each area is to the company’s strategic success.
 - c. “The MBA program builds on teamwork in many issues with group projects and assignments and I felt I was well prepared when working in teams. The TNCPE program helped to deliver a systems perspective different from the MBA program. All throughout school we learn different subjects; accounting, finance, operations, marketing, and so forth; however, as students, we learn a particular topic and move on to another. We never learn how they all apply to a company together, except in a business strategy course, but even then we just learn how they all roll into a company. We never actually get to grasp the interworking behind the systems. At TNCPE I got to dissect a company and see just how each division affects another. The information was broken down in the applications where you could really see how one aspect of a company played very important roles in another and how each area had to function systematically in order to be successful and efficient. Ultimately I feel like I used all parts of the MBA program in the TNCPE process. I mean sure, there were courses that had no material impact such as financial investments, but even classes like this build

on leadership and teamwork and those roles were played into the TNCPE process. So, without thinking strictly material I could not say that any class was irrelevant in the processes. Everything I have learned in school helped me with becoming an examiner in some way.”

- d. “Training methods included a mix of lectures, illustrative “games”, and break out hands-on work group sessions. Training moved at a good pace. It was nice to get out of my office and out of my comfort zone for a couple days. I think the examiner training and process shows an overview of how the whole structure of a company works not just individual functional areas. This high level overview is missing in most of the MBA courses. I also think the TNCPE process shows the importance of interrelation and communication between functional areas and departments. Every functional area is important. For the organization to function at a high level every area needs to function on the same level. The silo approach in the MBA coursework generally does not illustrate this. Among the most valuable experience I received with TNCPE was face-to-face exposure with people at other companies in other functions (networking if you like). Networking opportunities are sorely lacking in the distance MBA program. I enjoyed the experience and if my schedule permits I would consider serving as an examiner next year.”
- e. “Becoming a part of the TNCPE examiner team is like joining a family of friends, all with a similar pursuit of excellence. The MBA coursework helped to prepare me for this experience through laying the groundwork for understanding many of the things that I would later be evaluating. The examiner experience gave me the opportunity to see businesses as a whole unit, and allowed me to see the integration of many aspects of a business that make up that whole. This comes into play when you think of how your employee engagement affects directly your customer engagement, and eventually your bottom line, therefore, how you treat your employees and engage them through effective communication from the senior leaders, directly impacts your sales. I think that the chief thing that I learned through the examiner process was the ability to look at a business with a very cross-functional approach, viewing the success of the organization as a culmination of several factors rather than one individual thing.”

From the above excerpts of a small sample of student reports, it is clear that synergies numbered 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 (see above) are being realized. While traditional consulting may lead to realization of synergies numbered 4 and 5, in general, due to the narrow scope of the problems consultants are trying to solve, they do not lead to the realization of other synergies, especially synergy 2, i.e., systems thinking.

CONCLUSIONS

Synergies between business consulting and business education exist. However, the effectiveness of consulting experiences to

contribute in meaningful ways to teaching and learning can vary. The experience of serving as examiners for the national and state performance excellence awards lends itself to effectively creating synergies in the teaching and learning of important contemporary business concepts. This can be attributed to the special characteristics of the awards consulting process that extend beyond the practices and processes associated with traditional commercial consulting.

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