



A Journey Guided by Baldrige

A school district uses the criteria to improve employee satisfaction and engagement

by Amanda Hankel

Susan Muenther, HR director at the Pewaukee School District in Wisconsin, proclaims herself to be a bit of a metrics nerd. In her 26 years working in HR, she's always used metrics to measure performance, regardless of whether the organization asked for it, because it was her personal way of measuring HR's effectiveness within the organization.

But when the Pewaukee School District started using the Baldrige framework to guide its continuous improvement efforts, she really got excited.

"I had worked with the ISO 9000 quality process with a previous employer, and the Baldrige framework is very similar to that process," Muenther said. "It fits perfectly with HR because workforce development is part of the Baldrige process. It links HR with employee satisfaction and engagement."

Muenther presented earlier this month at the 2012 National Quality Education Conference in Louisville about the use of the Baldrige framework to improve HR metrics and employee engagement, but she said the organization's use of the quality approach stretches beyond that.

"The Baldrige framework guides the process, but we go beyond that to look at other things," she said. "We use levels, trends and benchmarks so that we can align everything in the organization. It's important to use the Baldrige framework across the organization and vertically within the organization. What that means is that every employee knows and is aligned in our continuous improvement journey, and understands how their job fits into the journey."



About more than the award

In 2004, one of the school district's board of education members was introduced to Baldrige at his employer and gave Pewaukee Schools Superintendent Dr. JoAnn Sternke a copy of the criteria, suggesting the district look into it.

"We really weren't looking to particularly solve or fix any particular problem," Muentner said. "But Dr. Sternke thought it could provide a means to develop continuous improvement processes and also provide an external validation of our current work."

Adopting the Baldrige framework became an objective in the district's strategic plan in the 2005-2006 academic year. The district submitted its first Baldrige application to the Wisconsin Forward Award (WFA) in January 2007.

"The district was looking for a meaningful way to recognize or commit to a continuous improvement process," Muentner said. "Our leaders really acknowledged the need to take a risk to grow. We identify closely with Jim Collins' book, *Good to Great*, and the Baldrige process was a perfect way for us to look at the good-to-great process. The Baldrige framework obviously supports a continuous learning cycle. It's not a start point and an end point; it's a journey."

According to Muentner, the application process jumpstarted the district's use of data in a more consistent and uniform way throughout all of its operations.

"As a school system, we are used to measuring school achievement, and we do that very well, but a lot of our other operations were new to using data and measurement," Muentner said.

The process also allowed the district to gauge its performance against other schools and assess its processes from an external point of view. Leadership was particularly intrigued by the fact that applying for the Baldrige process allowed for an external site visit.

"We thought we were doing well, but we wanted independent evaluation to tell us about what we were doing well at and where there were gaps," she said. "So, really, it wasn't about



the award, but it was a way to learn where we were as an organization and what we could do better.”

In 2007, the Pewaukee School District earned the mastery level award with the WFA—the first K-12 school district in the state to earn this honor. It earned mastery level again in 2009. In 2010, it achieved the highest distinction of excellence in the WFA program, again becoming the first K-12 school district to receive that award in Wisconsin.

Framework for engagement

In terms of HR and measuring employee satisfaction and engagement, the Pewaukee School District’s priorities and goals stem from its strategic planning process.

“Our strategic plan includes workforce engagement and development,” Muentner said. “So, we establish the improvement plan from the initiatives from the strategic planning process. It’s identified on an annual basis. The initiatives that are identified in the strategic plan provide what we need to measure. These include metrics on hiring, retaining, engaging and developing our workforce.”

The district conducts an annual employee satisfaction and engagement survey which allows Muentner to obtain direct feedback from every employee and to learn important information about the engagement level of employees.

“We ask employees to agree or disagree to statements such as, ‘My work gives me a sense of personal accomplishment, and ‘I’m satisfied with the recognition I receive for my work,’” Muentner said. “This allows the district to assess whether employees are fully engaged in their work and commitment to the work of the district.”

In addition to that survey, factors such as retention, student-to-staff ratio, percentage of teachers with advanced degrees, safety measures such as Occupational Safety and Health Administration modification ratings, timely performance evaluation completion and professional development completed are used to measure employee satisfaction and engagement as well.



“These are all different ways of giving us a complete picture of employee engagement and satisfaction,” Muentner said. “It’s not just about whether employees are happy. It goes much further than that; it goes into how committed they are to the organization and the organization’s goals.”

According to Muentner, employee engagement is a key element to any successful organization. Without it, no organization can hope to reach its goals or achieve higher levels of achievement. And in education, employee engagement on all levels is critical to meeting the needs of each student.

“While teachers provide the most direct impact on student achievement, there’s no doubt that every employee in our district has a critical role in the success of our student,” Muentner said. “That means secretaries providing support to our staff and parents, custodians providing a clean and safe environment and food-service staff serving delicious, nutritious food every day.

“Engaged employees have a belief in the organization,” she continued. “They have a real desire to make things better, an understanding of the big picture, respect of their colleagues and a willingness to go the extra mile. When you translate that to the education process, engaged employees simply help students achieve more and have better results, and that just leads to students who are ready for their life after school—college and career readiness, which is a key component to success.”

The metrics collected from the survey and other measures are used to benchmark the initiatives and measure progress throughout the planned year. Goals are set using a one-year and three-year framework, but progress is measured on a quarterly basis throughout the year. Measures are benchmarked with other school districts, providing a reference point to gauge progress.

“As HR director, it’s critical to me to know that employees understand how they fit into the organization and how their work contributes to the organization,” Muentner said. “The Baldrige process guides that effort and provides a framework for that.”



In fact, she said the Baldrige framework has allowed the district to think more systematically and use data to support decision making. Now, process management tools, such as flow charts, are used to facilitate a process, identify gaps in a process or refine a process to make it more effective or efficient. Collected data are used to analyze results and set performance expectations. Results are displayed transparently to internal and external stakeholders via dashboards.

“Collecting data helps measure progress toward the goal, and the data helps drive improvement as a never-ending process,” Muentner said.

Through its use of data and the Baldrige framework, the Pewaukee School District has made several changes and improvements to its processes.

For example, the HR department now uses a defined, consistent hiring process for each position. A flowchart outlines the entire process—from identifying the position to outlining the approval needed. Muentner said it’s led to a more rigorous hiring process and higher retention rates.

The district has also achieved higher satisfaction and engagement levels, being recognized as one of the top 100 workplaces by the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* in 2011 and 2012.

No end in sight

Despite its success, Muentner says the Pewaukee School District has no plans of stopping its continuous improvement journey. Every department in the district has a continuous improvement plan that’s linked with the district’s strategic plan. For Muentner and the HR department, it means continuing to find new ways to engage employees.

“I think of our district like a flower garden,” she said. “Each employee is like a different flower in the garden, and every flower needs certain elements. Sunshine is recognition and praise. Water is ongoing support and guidance. Fertilization is growth to their job or career. The garden might grow with one or more of those items, but it definitely will thrive with all of them.



“Some employees won’t thrive no matter what you do or how hard you try; they are your disengaged employees. Your engaged employees are like flowers—they spread and grow year after year. The more engaged employees you have, the more growth you have in the organization.”

The district will continue using the Baldrige criteria as the framework for its journey, Muentert said, and plans to apply for national recognition. But, she emphasizes, it’s really not about the award, but rather the journey and the progress the district continues to make.

“I don’t think we ever imagined where we could be when we began [the Baldrige process] six years ago, and we really believe we can be even better than we are now,” Muentert said. “It’s the continuous journey of finding ways to be even better than we ever imagined we could be that’s the really rewarding part of this process—accomplishing what you never thought you could and finding ways to do that. That’s the great thing about continuous improvement. There’s no specific end. There’s no stop sign. There’s no ‘we are done with this.’ It’s a continuous journey, so onward.”