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Want to improve your business game?

Play with someone better!

By *Triche Guenin*



As an individual trying to improve your athletic abilities (e.g. playing tennis, racing a boat, competing in a triathlon), how do you go about it? There are quite a few options: read/listen to subject matter experts, observe those who are best-in-class perform, investigate best practices from those who have overcome adversity. The common theme to these options is to learn from others - gain from their insights without having to endure the pain or mistakes they might have gone through. The same holds true for a team of people trying to improve their collective skill set (e.g. football team, crew team).

Why should a business be any different? According to Webster, "to improve" means "to enhance in value or quality; make better." Improvement implies changing the way something is normally done in order to make the outcome better. That means making a change. And change, even if small in nature, requires individuals to adapt their behavior. Since an organization is made up of individuals, it is up to the employees to change in order to help the organization chart a different course.

Many business leaders task individual employees to figure out how to improve the organization. They then deploy their "theories" on the rest of the employees. The chance of successful implementation is relatively rare. Is the risk of failure worth it to the organization or for the professional development of a few employees? The short answer is "No". Regardless of the rationale for the lack of success, it usually costs the organization time and money and can actually set the culture back in trying to make that change or any future changes.

So, why would an organization try to do it alone when the chance for success is slim? It would be best to take one of two approaches. Either 1) invest in your individual employees by encouraging them to go "outside" and learn from others. Ultimately the organization should then benefit from what they bring back and implement in their areas of responsibility. Or 2) invest in an outside resource that comes into the organization and works closely with those pegged individuals. But make sure to include, as a deliverable, the transfer of knowledge to take place that enables sustainability rather than an ongoing dependence of that outside entity.

It's like Pandora's Box - once given the opportunity to see the future or a different way of doing things, you're no longer able to go back to the old way. The bar keeps rising not only for yourself but for what you expect of others. It's called "stretch" - setting sights higher, putting expectations of goals out there, holding your organization and yourself accountable, taking some risks.

So, how do you, as a leader of your organization, even start to make improvements in your organization? It's like making an improvement in your golf game, you learn from the masters. How does that translate into a business context? You learn from those organizations that have started on their journey towards excellence and have been recognized for where they are and the improvements they've made.

So, how do you find organizations recognized for their improvements towards achieving performance excellence? First, let's define performance excellence. It is about taking an integrated, enterprise-wide approach to success:

- ensuring delivery of ever-increasing value to customers and stakeholders
- improving overall organizational effectiveness and capabilities
- enhancing organizational and personal learning
- managing change and achieving better results

Within specific industries, there are benchmark measurements to indicate how one organization either compares to others or to their industry average. These data provide some insight into how you, as an organization, are doing relative to your peers in certain areas. Many of these metrics are based on outcomes or results, not on HOW that organization got there. These changes are rarely reported or shared. But this learning, which comes from understanding what changed to accomplish the improvement and its application, is what benefits most organizations. Usually, improvements come about as a result of changes in operational processes.

Luckily, there are some professional associations or entities (e.g. business journals, chambers of commerce) that recognize local organizations that are doing some things "right" and usually in specific areas (e.g. best customer service, best place to work). The grand daddy of them all is the Baldrige National Quality Award program. It has a formal annual application/recognition process. And this

national program has spawned state and regional programs. Ours is the Rocky Mountain Performance Excellence (RMPEX) program - this is its new name, replacing Colorado Performance Excellence (CPEX) in order to include Wyoming and Montana.

All of these Performance Excellence programs are geared towards looking at the enterprise as a whole, rather than concentrating in one area, possibly to the demise of another. The foundation of these programs address the following categories that ALL organizations must consider in order to be successful: leadership, strategic planning, customers, knowledge transfer, employees, business processes and ultimately the results associated with all the aforementioned categories. Regardless of the industry, size, tax status, etc. of an organization, something can be learned and leveraged from one to another.

Therefore, not only challenge yourself to improve, but do so by "playing" with those better than you - and sometimes that means outside your industry (or specific sport). As a leader of your organization, are you willing to open Pandora's Box?

RMPEX will be holding its annual recognition conference on Friday Nov 4 at the Marriott Park Meadow location from 7:30-3:30. Two national Baldrige recipients will be sharing their lessons learned along their journey as well as other regional organizations. Go to www.rmpex.org for more details.

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