



Playing with Someone Better Than You

Never underestimate the value of benchmarking



When you try to improve your athletic abilities (e.g., playing tennis, swimming), how do you go about it? There are quite a few options, including observing how those who are best-in-class perform. When we learn from others, we gain from their insights without having to endure the mistakes they may have gone through to reach their expertise. The same tactic works for teams trying to improve their collective skill sets. Why should businesses be any different?

According to Webster's, to improve means "to enhance in value or quality; make better." Improvement implies changing the way something is normally done so as to make the outcome better.

To improve, athletes can try multiple approaches, including:

- Learning from what others before them have done
- Investing in a coach who can guide them and build on their strengths

Likewise, organizations can do the same by:

- Investing in individual employees by encouraging them to go "outside" and bring back what they learn from others
- Investing in an outside resource to transfer knowledge, with the ultimate goal of achieving independent competence in the skill

Just as with golf, where one learns by emulating the masters, organizations can learn from those who have made progress on their journey toward excellence. However, embarking on the improvement journey can be like opening Pandora's box: Once given the opportunity to see the future or a different way of doing things, organizations are often unable to go back to their old ways. Their expectations change, for themselves and for their employees.

So, how should a company find organizations that are recognized for their efforts in achieving performance excellence? Let's start by defining performance excellence. It is about taking an integrated, enterprisewide 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

As with individual sports and their respective statistics, there are benchmark measurements within specific industries to indicate how one organization either compares to others or to its industry average. These data provide insight into how an organization is doing relative to its peers in certain areas. However, most metrics (usually outcomes or results based) associated with *how* that organization got there are rarely reported or shared, even though part of the improvement journey involves understanding what changed to accomplish the improvement.

Fortunately, professional associations or entities such as business journals and chambers of commerce recognize local organizations that do things “right,” usually in specific areas (e.g., best customer service, best place to work). The **Baldrige Performance Excellence Program**, the best source for performance benchmarks in the United States, has a formal annual application and recognition process. This national program has spawned many **state and regional programs** as well.

All of these performance excellence programs focus the enterprise as a whole. They provide not only an environment for learning, but also a field where organizations can challenge themselves to improve by “playing” and “competing” with those better than themselves.

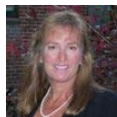
What field do you play in? As a leader in your organization, are you willing to open Pandora’s box?

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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