Building Bridges Between Researchers and Practitioners: A Collaborative Approach to Research in Performance Excellence

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This article describes a collaborative approach initiated by the Monfort Institute at the University of Northern Colorado to engage high-level practitioners of performance excellence and academic researchers to: a) identify the external and internal dilemmas facing practitioners in high-performing organizations; b) develop a purposeful research agenda that addresses both the needs and interests of practitioners and researchers; and c) develop a concept of operations to address the research agenda. High-performing organizations face many external pressures from customers, investors, suppliers and partners, and the public. In addition, they face internal challenges including leadership and work force turnover, cultural challenges, and limited understanding of the continuous refinement and integration of management systems at the upper levels of the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award (MBNQA) scoring scale. This initiative resulted in a viable research agenda of value to practitioners and researchers to better understand organizational performance excellence and improvement approaches and expand research efforts in quality management. Several projects are currently in process through the Monfort Institute, and plans for continued collaboration have been developed.

Key words: academic researchers, Baldrige Award, collaboration, performance excellence, practitioners, research, stakeholders, triple bottom line

INTRODUCTION

In a dynamic and increasingly complex global environment, an organization's current high performance is not necessarily a predictor of future success. Since the first Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award (MBNQA) in 1988, there have been 67 recipients, with four organizations being recognized twice. At the time of the award, all of the recipients had strong track records of continuous improvement and had achieved high levels of performance. The improvement and performance patterns of organizations after receiving the award, however, have varied. Some organizations have continued to improve, some organizations have maintained their performance in a changing world, and a few have experienced a decline in performance. To support continued improvement, the Baldrige Award Recipient (BAR) Consortium was created to facilitate the sharing of best practices and learning among the recipients. The two overarching questions that are at the forefront for this group are: 1) How can an organization sustain its current high levels of performance in a constantly changing environment? and 2) How can one lead these organizations to even higher levels of performance?

Monfort College of Business, a 2004 MBNQA recipient, is a member of the group asking these questions. In the spring of 2006, the Monfort Institute was established to address these two questions and create, manage, and disseminate knowledge for global excellence. The institute is an integral part of the Monfort College of Business at the University of Northern Colorado in Greeley, Colorado. The mission of the institute is to enhance business education by creating, managing, and disseminating knowledge to help organizations of all types achieve, sustain, and continuously improve performance and create value for multiple stakeholders in a changing and increasingly global environment. To do this, the institute is currently focused on the two broad areas identified by the BAR Consortium. The institute builds bridges between high-performing organizations (for example, MBNQA recipients) and academic researchers from a variety of universities to address executive-driven questions facing high-performing organizations of all types—business, healthcare, education, and nonprofit.

In this article, the author describes a collaborative approach that brings together high-level practitioners of performance excellence and academic researchers to: a) identify the external and internal dilemmas facing practitioners in high-performing organizations; b) develop a purposeful research agenda that addresses both the needs and interests of practitioners and researchers; and c) develop a concept of operations to address the research agenda. The outputs of the collaborative approach are analyzed and summarized. A participant survey is used to evaluate the collaborative approach. Finally, the path forward is described, including current research processes and projects.

THE 2006 MONFORT SUMMIT

In the summer of 2006, the Monfort Institute hosted a unique two-day gathering of BAR members and selected researchers from across the nation—the Monfort Summit. Its purpose was to bring Baldrige practitioners together with the academic researchers in a collaborative forum to develop a cutting-edge research agenda and a plan to move forward with the agenda.

Many academic researchers have identified the importance of collaboration. The gaps, or as Rynes, Bartunek, and Daft (2001) called it, "the great divide" between the needs and actions of practitioners and the needs, actions, and products of academic researchers is a hot topic with many academics and practitioners, as evidenced by the large number of journal articles and conference proceedings on the topic. Some have proposed that part of the problem lies with the researchers (Pfeffer and Fong 2002; Bailey and Ford 1996). Others such as Pfeffer and Sutton (2006) and Baldridge, Floyd, and Markoczy (2004) make the point that the practitioner's actions and practices are often not based on the latest scientific theory and often are practices that are known to not work. Still others have provided insights into the differences between the two groups (Baldrige, Floyd, and Markoczy 2004; Rynes, Bartunek, and Daft 2001; Grant 2007). While there are clear differences between the two groups in the areas of cultures, beliefs, assumptions, and ideologies, the answers to narrowing the gap may be as some have proposed, a matter of improving the process for producing new knowledge and translating that new knowledge into practice (Van de Ven 2007; Van de Ven and Johnson 2006; and Shapiro, Kirkman, and Courtney 2007).

The 36 summit participants included 20 practitioners from 12 Baldrige Award winning organizations, 10 academics from eight universities, three representatives from the Monfort Institute, and three special guests. The BAR Consortium network was used to contact and invite potential participants. The 12 participating organizations represented four of the five industry sectors eligible for the Baldrige Award including large service, large manufacturing, small business, and education (both K-12 and higher education). While healthcare organizations have participated in subsequent research forums, representatives from the healthcare sector were not able to attend the summit meeting. The 20 practitioners from BAR organizations included three senior leaders with titles equivalent to president, nine vice presidents, two directors, and six managers.

The participating academic researchers were chosen based on three criteria: a) their publishing record in the area of performance excellence; b) their experience as practitioners and working with practitioners; and c) their current level of interest in conducting research in the two areas identified by the BAR. The 10 academic researchers included six professors, one visiting professor, one associate professor, and two assistant professors from eight universities. The academics represented management and marketing disciplines including expertise in strategic management, organizational behavior, operations management and research, and quality management.

The 2006 summit had three fundamental objectives focused on understanding of the needs of practitioners and academic researchers:

1. Develop an interesting and compelling initial "draft" research agenda based on the needs of the practitioners and the interests of the academic researchers.
2. Develop a concept of operations to move the collaborative group forward and provide structure for the group to work together to accomplish the research agenda.
3. Begin building a collaborative learning community of practitioners and academics.

The approach used to address these questions was a two-phase process designed to leverage the knowledge, skills, and abilities of the academic researchers and practitioners and address both the production and translation challenges with producing relevant research. The first phase was focused on addressing part of the production challenges by basing the problems and questions on the needs of practitioners and the interests of academic researchers. A five-step collaborative approach was used to develop the research agenda: 1) identify the key management dilemmas; 2) identify the specific management questions; 3) develop research questions; 4) reflect and discuss; and 5) prioritize the research agenda. To address additional challenges with production and translation, a four-step collaborative approach was used to develop the concept of operations and the path forward: 1) define success for each of the three stakeholder groups (practitioners, academic researchers, and the Monfort Institute); 2) identify the challenges associated with achieving success; 3) identify the needs that each stakeholder group has in order to achieve success; and 4) identify the next steps and commitments. The meeting was facilitated by a third-party professional practitioner-facilitator.

IDENTIFYING KEY MANAGEMENT DILEMMAS IN PERFORMANCE EXCELLENCE

The first step toward a research agenda was to identify the management dilemmas that the organizations face in attempting to sustain their high performance and lead their organizations to even higher levels of performance. Four questions—two focused on external challenges and two focused on internal challenges—were used to provoke four separate roundtable "knowledge cafe" style discussions (Brown and Isaacs 2005). These questions were sent out prior to the meeting so participants could come prepared to discuss. They were:

1. What are the internal problems and challenges you face in sustaining a high level of performance?
2. What are the external problems and challenges you face in sustaining a high level of performance?
3. What are the internal problems and challenges you face in reaching even higher levels of performance?
4. What are the external problems and challenges you face in reaching even higher levels of performance?

Participants were divided into four groups that rotated among the four tables (one for each question). Each table had a facilitator who did not rotate but instead stayed with the table and question throughout the session. The inputs were captured on flip charts and later transcribed into electronic text documents for further analysis. After all participants had a chance to provide input on all four questions, the facilitators provided a summary for each question of the results to the large group. The facilitator then initiated a large group discussion to clarify the dilemmas and identify themes. The management dilemmas identified fell into two main groups—external and internal.

External Dilemmas

The complex external environment is rapidly changing in ways that create both challenges and opportunities for high-performing organizations. Organizations today face increased competition for the best suppliers, a changing competitive landscape, major shifts and discontinuities in technology, increased protection of intellectual property along with aggressive defense of intellectual property, competition based on prices, and increasing international competition. The global environment is complicated by geopolitical issues, security risks and acts of terrorism, cultural issues, and changing markets. While a complex changing environment is not new, as Grant (2007, 12) points out "history suggests there have been relatively few tranquil periods for general managers in market-based economies, but today challenges and combinations of challenges seem to be multiplying." The MBNQA recipients are used to figuring out ways to succeed in changing external and internal environments. Angell (2001, 312) found that, "successful quality and environmental initiatives are driven by a mixture of external and internal pressures. Conversely, unsuccessful quality and environmental initiatives tend to be driven primarily by internal management pressures." In addition, Ford, Evans, and Matthews (2004) identified pressure from powerful external entities as one of five factors that connect the conduct of self-assessment to an organization's external environment. In addition to the challenges of the external environment, MBNQA recipients also face increasing pressure from multiple external stakeholders and constituencies such as customers (including students and patients), investors (including parent organizations, donors, and taxpayers, as applicable), suppliers and partners, and the community and public in general.

While many of the external dilemmas were related to the organizations' multiple stakeholders, the discussion initially focused on the customers. Customers in this context range from students of education organizations to patients of healthcare organizations. The customer-driven dilemmas are clustered into three categories: 1) staying current with the changing needs and wants of customers and markets; 2) developing a value proposition in price-driven markets; and 3) a lack of understanding of the advantages of performance excellence. One of the biggest issues identified is rapidly changing customer and market needs. While the participating organizations have systematic approaches to identify customer requirements and keep those methods current with changing needs, many found this to be a challenge and an area for improvement. In addition to the changing needs, many of the participants were experiencing increased competition and an increased emphasis on price. While the participants are efficient and are capable of delivering high value, many of their strategies are based on differentiated products and services and high value versus price. This is both a strategic challenge and an operational challenge. Part of the issue with the value proposition is the lack of awareness of how a high-performing supplier can be an advantage and provide greater value than a low price provider. The customers do not seem to understand the advantages of having a supplier that is an MBNQA recipient. While customer and market pressures dominated a large part of the discussion, the participants are also under increasing pressures from a variety of stakeholders.

While it is often difficult to create value for a single stakeholder such as the customer, it is even more difficult to design the organizational systems to create value for multiple stakeholders and constituencies. The concept of creating value for multiple stakeholders is embedded in the MBNQA model and is: a) found in the six-panel scorecard described in category 7 results; b) embedded in the core values and concepts; and c) integrated throughout the criteria and specifically in item 1.2 Social Responsibility (NIST 2007). Consequently, this is not a new concept for BAR organizations. What makes this a challenge for organizations is the difficulty in identifying the leverage points and developing new ways of designing the organization's products, service, operations, and management practices to address these multiple requirements and create value for all stakeholders at once. While the multiple stakeholders are addressed by individual systematic approaches, there is still a need to develop more integrated management system that resolves the conflicts among the various requirements. The additional external stakeholders that were identified during the summit included investors and parent organizations, suppliers and partners, the community, and government oversight.

Regardless of whether the organization is a profit-seeking company, a public school, a government organization, or a nonprofit, there are "investors" providing resources to support capital investment and operations. For public schools and government organizations, these investors are the taxpayers. For nonprofits, they are the donors. While some investors expect a financial return on their investment, others simply expect the organization to create the most value for the beneficiaries (for example, students) using the least resources (taxpayer and donor dollars). Investor interests are often represented by a smaller group such as the board of directors, board of advisors, congress and state legislatures, school boards, and parent organizations. Although the value of the MBNQA model in creating key results is supported by various research studies (Hendricks and Singhal 1997; Evans and Jack 2003; Jacob, Madu and Tang 2004; Evans 2004; and Alexander, Jares, and Latham 2007) and the specific results of the 67 award recipients since 1998, the investors and their representatives often do not understand the value of the MBNQA model. Part of the challenge with the groups representing the investors is they often have turnover, making the communication and education of the MBNQA value proposition a constant requirement. In addition, there are some financial pressures with the investors and their representatives that are specific to the particular industry, such as the tension between short-term profit expectations and long-term financial sustainability for publicly traded companies and the decline in state funding levels for schools. The challenge is to build a common understanding and vision between the organization and the investor stakeholders.

The notion that long-term supplier and partner relationships are critical to success is not new. Deming (1986) points out the advantages of long-term supplier relationships as one of his 14 points for management and most everyone is familiar with the saying, "garbage in, garbage out." However, while the suppliers and partners of MBNQA recipients might not experience turnover frequently, the people who work for the suppliers and partners often do. This results in a continuing education requirement similar to the one identified in the investor discussion. The need for suppliers and partners to understand and apply the MBNQA model varies depending on the nature of the organization's value chain. Some organizations are highly dependent on external suppliers and partners while others are not. Grant (2007, 13) points out that the "globalization of markets has expanded substantially during the last decade" and "Internet-based transactions have accelerated the speed and extended the reach of commercial activity." These two factors are contributing to the increased challenges and importance of supplier and partnership relationships and performance.

As with the previous stakeholders, the notion that performance excellence includes corporate citizenship and support for the community is not a new concept for MBNQA recipients. The MBNQA model incorporates ethics, environmental stewardship, and support to the communities in the core values and concepts, processes, and results or comprehensive six-panel scorecard (NIST 2007). There is increasing pressure, however, from the community, the public, and their representatives (for example, government regulatory agencies, "watchdog" groups, special interest groups, and so on) for organizations to be more transparent and operate in ways that create value for the overall community at the same time they create value for their customers and investors. These externalities are not limited to domestic organizations but also are coming from an increasing number of global organizations, including the Intergovernmental Panel of Climate Change (IPCC) and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) (Grant 2007). For many of the MBNQA recipients with operations and supply chains around the globe, the operating environment is getting increasingly complex and challenging with many influential stakeholders. In addition to the pressures from multiple external stakeholders, MBNQA recipients face internal challenges with leadership and work force turnover, sustaining a culture of excellence, and motivation to work toward the next level.

Internal Dilemmas

In addition to the dilemmas associated with the external environment and multiple stakeholders, the executives of MBNQA recipients face several internal challenges with leadership and work force turnover, company and country cultures, continued refinement and integration of the management systems, and a lack of motivation to continue improving the organization. The dilemmas associated with leadership turnover are mainly focused on the lack of understanding of the key leadership characteristics that should drive leadership development and succession planning. Organizations have experienced similar challenges with work force turnover including work force hiring, development, and competition for talent. Both company culture and country cultures create dilemmas for MBNQA recipients. The company culture has been characterized by internal conflict and "sibling rivalry" with other divisions and companies within the organization. In addition, some organizations that are growing into new areas are facing dilemmas with the deployment of processes from one country culture to another. Working on refining the management systems to increase the level of integration presents a couple of challenges including the difficulty of improvement at the upper end of the MBNQA scoring (maturity) scale and the limited knowledge available on the benefits of improvements at the upper end of the maturity scale. The limited understanding of the benefits of further improvement is just one of the factors that impacts the level of motivation to continue the journey, which might be the greatest risk that high-performing organizations face.

Senior leadership turnover has been a challenge for some MBNQA recipients. Constancy of purpose and continuity of leadership were identified as key factors in achieving and sustaining high performance. This is consistent with the findings of Flynn, Schroeder, and Sakakibara (1995) and Alexander, Jares, and Latham (2007). MBNQA recipients as a group have experienced mixed results in performance after a senior leadership change even when the subsequent leader was promoted from within. On the surface it appears that leaders capable of achieving and sustaining high performance may be in limited supply. However, without a better understanding of what knowledge, skills, and abilities are required to lead an organization to high performance, it is difficult for organizations to develop systematic approaches for leadership development and succession planning that will increase the odds of sustaining the gains in performance and moving to even higher levels after a leadership change. A similar turnover problem exists with the work force.

As with senior leaders, work force turnover can create difficulties in both sustaining high performance and moving to even higher levels of performance. The relatively low unemployment rate in the United States from 1997 through 2006 (3.8 percent to 6.3 percent), which at the time of the meeting was 4.8 percent, creates a competitive environment for talent (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2007). This shortage of talented workers creates a compound problem. First, it makes hiring the right talent difficult and expensive. Second, it makes the organizations' employees attractive targets for other organizations, thus increasing the turnover problem. Two additional factors contribute to the problem of turnover—the lack of education on quality management and performance excellence fundamentals and the limited understanding of the organizations' specific management systems and knowledge. Many prospective employees have not been exposed to the various tools, methods, and models associated with quality improvement and performance excellence. In fact, in many business schools, quality management and performance excellence are at best limited to management majors and are often electives. While filling the knowledge gap on quality fundamentals can be done through formal and informal corporate training programs and employee development methods, trying to fill the knowledge gap on the organization's specific business system and the associated organizational knowledge is not as easy. One problem with organization knowledge is, as Spender (2006, 240) points out, "Knowledge is inherently intangible, sometimes incomplete or mislocated, sometimes unidentified or inconsistent, and often contested." This drives the need for better knowledge management approaches.

The cultural dilemmas facing MBNQA recipients fall into three categories: a) internal conflicts and sibling rivalry; b) challenges and barriers to sharing; and c) cross-cultural deployment of practices and processes. All three cultural dilemmas are potential barriers to sustaining excellence and moving the organization to the next level. This is consistent with the findings of Flynn, Schroeder, and Sakakibara (1995, 683): "Quality management is a philosophy that pervades the entire organization, rather than the responsibility of a few isolated individuals or departments." Some MBNQA recipients have experienced jealousy and even hostility from members of "sibling" divisions or companies. This not only has limited the deployment of lessons learned to other organizations but in some cases has resulted in creating an anti-performance excellence (at least as defined by MBNQA) climate throughout the organization. This not only impacts the larger organization but also affects the competition for investment dollars from the parent organization. For some MBNQA recipients, distance and organizational differences are both challenges to sharing knowledge and organizational learning throughout the organization (Senge 2006). The first issue is simply one of time and effort. It is usually more difficult to share what one organization or location learns with many organizations spread around the globe than it is if everyone is in the same building. The second issue is a translation problem and the resistance to ideas from organizations that are not in similar industries or have similar operations and operating contexts. Finally, some MBNQA recipients face challenges deploying processes and applying knowledge acquired in one country culture to operations and management practices in other country cultures. The main challenge seems to be in figuring out what process elements and characteristics to standardize and which elements and characteristics to allow the various locations to customize based on their unique context. An associated dilemma is that process customization is often at odds with the goal of aligning and integrating the overall management system.

While the organizations have successfully used the MBNQA model to design their own management system to fit their unique needs, these systems are not perfect, as evidenced by the number of opportunities for improvement found in the feedback reports the year they received the award. Many of the opportunities for improvement are focused on the integration of the various system components. This is not only an issue for the organization's own internal processes but also for the processes that interact with other organizations, including other divisions, parent organizations, suppliers, partners, and customers. There are two challenges associated with increasing the level of integration. First, there is limited knowledge and understanding of the key linkages in the system at the upper levels of maturity or scoring levels. Second, many organizations are too busy keeping up with external changes and the changes to the criteria that they often do not have the time to address the higher levels of integration. While the MBNQA recipients are convinced that the benefits of improving their system up to the 600 to 700 point far outweigh the investment, there is not enough empirical evidence at this point to know what the return on investment is when going from 600 to 700 up to 800 and above. Consequently, it is not clear if the "next level" is related to an increase in the overall MBNQA score for the organization (for example, 800) or is based on something entirely different such as a shift in thinking about the organization as a system.

In addition to the external and internal dilemmas that the MBNQA recipients face, some of them also face the issue of a lack of motivation to continue the journey of excellence. Some organizations have found that once they had achieved the award recognition, the motivation to improve declined. Some attributed this in part to arrogance that can emerge when organizations are high performing, which is a notion that is consistent with the findings of Kotter and Heskett (1992). Others attributed it to what they called the "Baldrige blues," which is a feeling of mild depression that occurred in some MBNQA recipients after the high of the recognition wore off and the organization did not have another compelling vision or goal in place to work toward. And some simply do not see the value of continued assessment and improvement cycles, which is related to the previous discussion on the value of increasing the MBNQA score from 600 to 700 on up to 800 or more. The real danger is entropy, which can cause performance to slowly decay eventually to the point of losing competitive advantage and waking up one day to the equivalent of the 1980 Xerox dilemma where Japan was selling copiers in the United States for what it was costing Xerox to make copiers (Kotter and Heskett 1992). Or as Intel's CEO Andrew Grove put it in the preface of his book, *Only the Paranoid Survive,* "Business success contains the seeds of its own destruction" (Grove 1996). It is not clear what causes this lack of motivation in some organizations, nor is it clear how to prevent it from occurring or at least mitigate the affect when it occurs. What is clear is that it is apparently difficult for organizations to maintain the motivation and focus on the original notion of a performance excellence "journey without an end" once the organization has achieved high performance and has been recognized for its accomplishments. One should not confuse the issue of not continuing to use MBNQA to assess the organization after being recognized with the award as "not doing Baldrige." Many of the organizations that have stopped the internal self-assessments are still using the custom management system that they designed using the MBNQA model.

It is clear that MBNQA recipients face many internal and external challenges in trying to maintain the gains in performance and move to even higher levels of performance. Many of the challenges, however, are similar in that they are associated with the challenges of turnover of members from one or more of the stakeholder groups or they are associated with the challenges of trying to refine and integrate the management systems to achieve even higher performance. The need to create value for multiple stakeholders is not new, but the requirement of continuous stakeholder re-education at this point in the journey is a challenge. In addition, there is increasing pressure from a variety of stakeholder groups on the issues of the environment and society. This increasing pressure often comes from formal organizations that represent the stakeholders, such as the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE) and the Carbon Disclosure Project (CDP). It appears that all organizations are going to have the opportunity to address these issues proactively or wait and see what legislation and consumer "sanctions" (regulatory requirements, carbon taxes, and so on) are imposed on them. MBNQA recipients are already predisposed to address these issues proactively; however, the future challenge will be to find ways to integrate the dimensions of the environmental and social aspects into all management practices including strategy, execution, measurement, and learning. This will require a better understanding of the organization system and expansion of the current systems perspective. The next level might be simply figuring out a way to be competitive in a world that demands organizations create profit in ways that are also good for the planet and the people or triple bottom line (Elkington, Emerson, and Beloe 2006). Or, as one of the participants asked, "At what point do you…[ask] what is important for the next generation?" The biggest risk might be doing nothing at all, which is the danger of having a low level of motivation. All of these dilemmas generate questions that leaders need to have answered in order to address the challenges and success in the increasing complex and dynamic global environment.

DEVELOPING A RESEARCH AGENDA

Once the management dilemmas were identified and discussed, the next step was to identify the gaps in practitioner knowledge and develop specific research questions. The first step was to identify the questions that the practitioners need answered in order to address the dilemmas. Each participant working alone identified his or her management questions and wrote each question on a "sticky" note (one question per sticky note). The sticky notes were then collected by the facilitators and organized into categories to form one large affinity diagram on the wall. The affinity diagram was composed of 112 management questions organized into 11 categories: strategy, stakeholders, processes, integration, people, knowledge management, metrics, innovation, MBNQA criteria, leadership, and culture.

The academics met separately from the practitioners to develop potential "draft" research questions that when answered would help fill the knowledge gaps identified by the management questions. The academics developed research questions for the management questions that they thought had the greatest potential to address the management dilemmas. The academics initially developed a total of 40 research questions—approximately three to five questions for each of the 11 categories. The draft questions were then documented and distributed to the entire group of practitioners and academics. The group then discussed and refined the questions based on feedback from the practitioners. These questions were categorized into the following groups.

Strategy

While there were many strategic challenges and dilemmas identified, the group did not develop many research questions directly related to strategy processes. The one area of research that was identified was a descriptive study to capture the strategic management processes for both MBNQA recipients and a comparison group of organizations that had not used the MBNQA criteria. The objective is to develop a database of strategic planning process as a starting point for the many interesting management questions. The group did identify a cross-disciplinary question in this area.

- How does one integrate knowledge management, customer-focused processes, and strategic planning system to maximize competitive advantage?

Stakeholders

There are numerous management dilemmas that involve creating value for multiple stakeholders. While many of the research questions indirectly address stakeholder issues, the group identified three questions directly related to the challenges of multiple stakeholders and, in particular, stakeholder turnover.

- Why don't stakeholders understand the benefits of performance excellence and the MBNQA process? While this is partially explained by the constant turnover of members of the stakeholder groups, it is not clear if turnover is the only issue.
- What are the most effective approaches to continuously educate stakeholders about the benefits of pursuing high performance using the MBNQA process?
- How can organizations describe the benefits and values of performance excellence and the MBNQA process to stakeholders?

Processes

The challenges associated with expanding operations to countries around the globe generated a few research questions.

- The first question focuses on the issue of execution excellence and the extent or depth of process deployment. Part of the interest here is based on setting priorities when deploying processes to new locations. What are the key factors that affect the successful deployment of processes to new locations?
- A related question focuses on the degree to which processes should be standardized when deployed to locations in different countries. This question involves understanding the aspects and characteristics of processes that need standardization versus those characteristics that can and possibly should be customized for the unique needs of the local country culture. What process elements and characteristics should be standardized when deploying processes in new country cultures?

Integration

There are several dilemmas that are directly related to the issue of management system integration. First, there is the dilemma of not knowing the benefits associated with higher levels of integration. Second, there are difficult challenges associated with attempting to move the organization from 600 to 700 points on the MBNQA scoring scale to 800 and above.

- What is the value or benefit of achieving a high level of integration for categories 1-6 process items?
- What are the key characteristics of integration at the 800 level and above? What are the key integration points in the system? What are the best approaches to increased alignment and integration?

People

Four questions were developed to address the dilemmas associated with the turnover of people and the competition for talent.

- What are the most effective approaches to recruit, hire, train, and motivate employees with an aptitude and passion for organizational performance excellence?
- What are the most effective approaches to get new employees to embrace the culture of continuous improvement and performance excellence?

- What are the most effective approaches to educate a pool of future employees who quickly add value to a high-performance organization?
- What are the most effective approaches to create a structure that rewards long-term contributions to overall organization performance?

Knowledge Management

Knowledge management (KM) emerged as a key success factor in sustaining the current level of performance and seeking even higher performance. The KM questions focused on the key characteristics of a KM system and the criteria for evaluating the effectiveness.

- What are the key characteristics and elements of a KM system that support and foster a learning organization?
- What are the criteria for evaluating effectiveness and the value of a KM system?

Measurement

Several questions emerged related to the measurement of performance. The first question is focused on the dilemmas associated with trying to create value for multiple stakeholders. A related question focuses on the metrics that are useful for communicating with key stakeholders. The last area of interest focuses on the ability of the organization to anticipate changes in the market and predict future success.

- What are the measures related to value creation for multiple stakeholders?
- What metrics and mechanisms are most effective for communicating organization performance and results to all types of stakeholders?
- What are the early external and internal warning signs that relate to failure or success in the marketplace?

Innovation

Given the difficulty in maintaining high performance in a changing world and the challenges involved with identifying and moving to the next level, it was not surprising that innovation and creativity emerged as key research topics. The two key questions focus on the internal environment: How does one create it and how does one evaluate it?

- What are the most effective approaches to creating an infrastructure and culture to foster innovation? What are the most effective approaches to measure the value of innovation? In addition to these basic questions there is a bit of a paradox associated with the existing highly successful system and the creativity and innovation that might be necessary to move to the next level.
- What are the most effective approaches to maintaining high levels of quality while incorporating ways to encourage innovation and creativity to take the organization to the next level? For example, systematic processes that support quality may not embrace the open-ended, flexible steps required in portions of the process required to encourage innovation.

MBNQA Criteria

In addition to the integration issues at the higher scoring bands, the participants identified several questions focused on the MBNQA model. Most of the questions were focused on understanding the organization as a system including the key themes and leverage points that have the greatest influence on high performance. Two questions were developed to address the key themes issue.

- What are the common themes of the 600-point organizations? Do they share similar strengths and weaknesses?
- One question was developed to identify the key leverage points. Which process criteria (categories 1-6) have the greatest influence on results?

Leadership

While much is known about leadership in general (Bass 1990), senior leader activities and practices (Bass 2007; Hambrick, Finkelstein, and Mooney 2005; Hambrick and Mason 1984; and Kotter 1999), and leading organizational transformation (Kotter 1995;

Collins 2001; and Beckhard and Harris 1987), the current knowledge of systematic approaches to leading the journey to performance excellence using the MBNQA model are primarily anecdotal examples from MBNQA recipients such as those described in Ryan (2007) and Crownover, Bush, and Darrouzet (1999). Several research questions focused on the dilemmas associated with senior leaders.

- What are the impacts of leadership changes (turnover) on MBNQA organizations? How can these be mitigated?
- What are the characteristics of leadership transitions that continue the existing direction of success?
- How do organizations transition leaders without losing successful practices?
- How do leaders and leadership processes differ between Baldrige adopters and non-adopters?
- What are the most effective methods to institutionalize leadership development?
- Finally, how does one manage organizational change to minimize adverse impact on sustainability and constancy of purpose?

Culture

One of the areas for investigation that is both a dilemma and a potential solution is the topic of organizational culture. While the organizational culture has created challenges in some organizations, in others it seems to be the key to sustaining high performance. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the longer the management systems are in place, the more ingrained the habits become and thus the more sustainable the system. Several questions were developed to explore these cultural issues.

- What are the common features in the cultures of high-performing organizations? If common features exist, how does an organization foster the implementation and institutionalization of these key features?
- What are the relationships of organizational culture to performance excellence? Are there different elements of organizational culture that sustain excellence versus those elements that move performance to the next level?

Table 1 Research agenda priorities—Multivoting results.

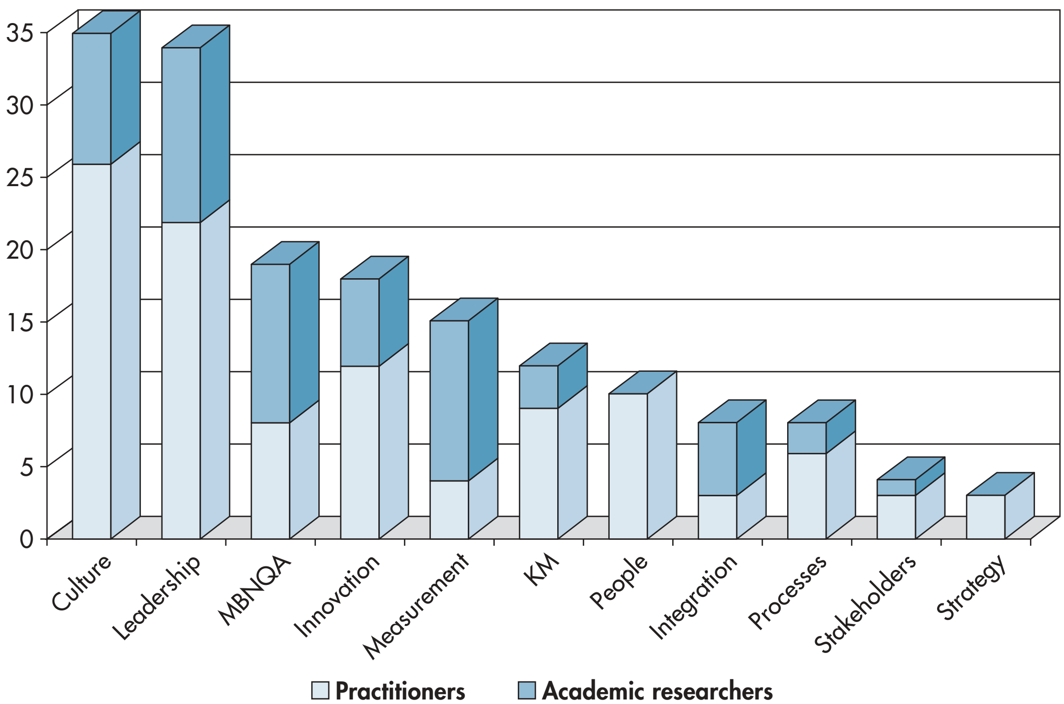
Question category	Practitioners	Researchers	Total
Culture	26	9	35
Leadership	22	12	34
MBNQA Criteria	8	11	19
Innovation	12	6	18
Measurement	4	11	15
Knowledge management	9	3	12
People	10	0	10
Integration	3	5	8
Processes	6	2	8
Stakeholders	3	1	4
Strategy	3	0	3

Number of votes cast for questions in each of the 11 categories

- Does a particular organizational culture facilitate performance excellence, or do excellent organizations develop strong organizational cultures? This question is a "chicken versus egg" question.
- Finally, what types and characteristics of organizational culture are most resilient to changes in organizational leadership?

Once the research questions were developed and discussed the next task was to prioritize the 11 categories (see Table 1). The research questions were written on large flip chart paper and each participant was given five sticky dots to use to indicate his or her votes for the most important questions. The practitioners were given blue sticky dots and the academic researchers were given yellow sticky dots. The participants were not told that the color of their sticky dots was different for each group. They were allowed to use their five votes in any combination. For example, they could use all five votes for a single question, they could vote for five different questions, or any combination in between. Once the voting was complete the participants were told about the significance of the blue and yellow dots. The dots on

Figure 1 Research priorities.



Note: The number of votes available for the practitioners was larger than the number of votes available to the academic researchers. Consequently, the stacked bar chart can be misleading.

the flip charts provided a visual picture of the priorities and helped focus the discussion.

The two most important areas for research were clear—culture and leadership. The second most important group was MBNQA, innovation, and measurement. Knowledge management and people were a close third. The areas of integration, processes, stakeholders, and strategy came in fourth with very few votes. The number of votes available for each group was not equal. The practitioners outnumbered the academics by approximately two to one. Consequently, a stacked bar chart can be misleading and caution should be used when viewing Figure 1.

DEVELOPING A CONCEPT OF OPERATIONS

A concept of operations consisting of key success factors, challenges, needs, and next steps was developed to guide the efforts of the collaborative group as they start working on the research agenda. The participants were divided into three groups (practitioners, academic researchers, and Monfort Institute) to separately address four key issues.

1. Define success for each stakeholder group (practitioners, academic researchers, and the Monfort Institute)
2. Identify the challenges associated with achieving success
3. Identify the needs that each stakeholder group has to achieve success
4. Identify next steps and commitments

The first three issues were addressed in round one. Each group privately developed its answers to the first three questions and developed a presentation for the larger group. Then each group presented its answers to the first three questions to the larger group. Each perspective was discussed and issues were clarified. After each group understood the other groups' definitions of success, challenges, and needs, the groups then went back and identified what they were willing to do to meet the other groups' needs.

In defining success the practitioners identified 10 criteria for quality research:

1. Content—New or profound information and best practices versus incremental knowledge in a narrow topic.
2. Readability—New knowledge presented in a language that they can understand that is fully deployable to all employees in the organization.
3. Utility—Actionable information that will help practitioners close gaps in performance, exceed customer expectations, and help sustain the organization in turbulent times.
4. Transferability—New knowledge needs to be transferable across the organization and ideally across industry sectors. The corollary to this requirement in research is the concept of generalizability.
5. Credibility—The depth of scholarship, including analysis and supporting data, is sufficient to inspire confidence and implementation of the new knowledge (Baldridge, Floyd, and Markoczy 2004). Part of the credibility is transparency on sponsorship and funding sources.
6. Timely—New knowledge and information needs to be accessible in time to address real-world problems and challenges and ideally in time to create a competitive advantage.
7. Access—Easy access to new knowledge and information available in multiple media and formats.
8. Benefits—There should be a clear connection between the new knowledge and information and organization results and overall success.
9. Involvement—Practitioners should be involved throughout the research process. As the practitioners put it, "Don't ask for our problems and data and then toss the research findings over the wall." The corollary to this in organizational change is the notion that resistance to change decreases as the involvement of the key stakeholders increases (Beckhard and Harris 1987).
10. Dissemination—Present new knowledge and information at public forums such as the annual NIST Quest for Excellence and make the new knowledge available to the public.

Not only did the practitioners identify a comprehensive list of what success is, they also succinctly described what success is not. According to the practitioners success is "not academic arcane language in some obscure journal."

Academic researchers identified three key factors for success:

1. Access to data—Access to good data and cooperation from participating organizations.
2. Dissemination—Successful dissemination of new knowledge via multiple channels including high-quality academic journal articles, top practitioner journals, conferences, and workshops.
3. Interesting—Broaden the interest in the research topic with graduate students and academic colleagues both within and outside the particular discipline. The requirement for the research to be "interesting" is consistent with the definition of research proposed by Baldridge, Floyd, and Markoczy (2004, 1065) "interesting based on the extent to which it challenges assumptions or extends knowledge…."

The combined key success factors identified by the practitioners and academic researchers are consistent with the notion that research has a dual purpose of application to practice and advancing theory (Van de Ven and Johnson 2006; Hodgkinson, Herriot, and Anderson 2001; and Pettigrew 2001).

The definition of success for the Monfort Institute is inextricably linked to the success of the practitioners and academic researchers. The main role of the institute is to support the process of knowledge creation, management, and dissemination. To be effective at that role will require that the institute develop the capability to facilitate the research process to achieve the combined practitioner-academic researcher definition of success.

The practitioners and researchers identified multiple challenges in trying to work together to produce new knowledge and insights that are useful for the practitioners and publishable by the academics. Some of the challenges are directly related to the key success factors, while others are related to the research process. The practitioners identified 10 challenges:

1. Timeliness—The typical academic timeline is longer than the typical business timeline. The challenge is to reduce the research cycle time while maintaining quality.
2. Pressures—Increasingly practitioners are being held accountable for their actions and the results they produce. Consequently, for practitioners to justify taking the time to participate in research projects, the research must be relevant to evolving priorities and help practitioners anticipate and prepare for the changing challenges.
3. Threats to validity—While the practitioners want to participate in the research process to increase the relevance, they also recognize the potential for their collaboration to "dilute" the level of rigor.
4. Differences—The practitioners identified the differences in view points, perspective on value, priorities, and motivation between the practitioners and the researchers as a challenge to accomplishing the dual purpose of research.
5. Security—How will the researchers effectively protect confidential data from the participating organizations?
6. Priorities—This is perceived misalignment of academic priorities and rewards with practitioner priorities and rewards.
7. Academic disciplines—The research agenda identifies several dilemmas and questions that are cross-disciplinary problems. Academics often know colleagues in their particular discipline (for example, strategic management) from other universities better than they know faculty in their own school.
8. Sample size—Increasing the participation of the BAR Consortium members in order to increase the validity and generalizability of the research findings.
9. Competing goals—The challenge is to develop research approaches that maximize both relevance and vigor.
10. Funding—Funding for research was identified as a challenge for both the practitioners and the researchers.

Money and data are the two primary needs of researchers, so it is hardly surprising that these are also the top two challenges. The academic researchers identified three main challenges or concerns:

1. Access to data—Getting access to good data and cooperation from a large enough group of organizations to support credible research.
2. Funding—External funding sufficient to buy time off from teaching, pay research assistants, and pay for travel to collect data and meet as a research team.
3. Academic environment—Academic publications often lag behind contemporary management practice and changes in organizations. Academic research needs to be on the "leading edge" of management thought and practice.

All three groups (practitioners, researchers, and the institute) identified the support that they need from the other groups to overcome the challenges and achieve the collective definition of success. Once the groups discussed and understood each other's definition of success, challenges, and support needs, the groups again worked separately to identify what they were willing to do to address the needs and challenges of the other groups. The alignment between the commitments to action and the challenges and needs of the other groups was remarkable and set the stage for further collaboration.

EVALUATING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF A COLLABORATIVE APPROACH

To evaluate the methods that were used to bring together the practitioners and academics in a collaborative forum, a brief survey was sent out to all 36 participants via e-mail. A total of 27 participants responded to the online survey for a response rate of 75 percent. The survey asked two demographic questions

Table 2 Survey results—Selected questions.

Question	SD	D	N	A	SA
Q3—The summit resulted in a "draft" of a compelling research agenda.			1	14	12
Q4—The summit identified the needs of my stakeholder group (for example, BAR leader, academic researcher, and so on).		1	2	9	15
Q5—The summit helped to build a "collaborative community" of BAR leaders and academic researchers.			1	12	14
Q6—Overall, the summit met my expectations.			1	12	14
Q7—The overall meeting design helped us achieve the objectives.			2	7	18
Q8—The facilitation approach helped us achieve the objectives.			1	10	16

Figure 2 Overall satisfaction.

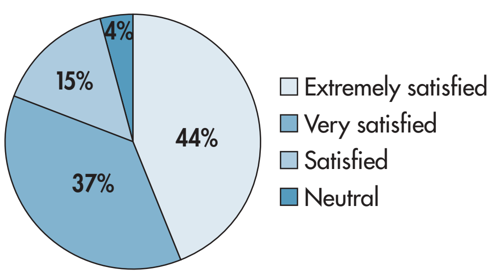


Table 3 Practitioners vs. academic researchers.

Question	Pearson Chi-Square	Significance
Q3—The summit resulted in a "draft" of a compelling research agenda.	.035	Significant at the .05 level
Q4—The summit identified the needs of my stakeholder group (for example, BAR leader, academic researcher, and so on).	.521	
Q5—The summit helped to build a "collaborative community" of BAR leaders and academic researchers.	.459	
Q6—Overall, the summit met my expectations.	.459	
Q7—The overall meeting design helped us achieve the objectives.	.074	Significant at the .10 level
Q8—The facilitation approach helped us achieve the objectives.	.054	Significant at the .10 level

and seven questions focused on the effectiveness of the methods used and their satisfaction.

For questions Q3 through Q8 the participants were asked to choose between five choices on a scale of: strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, and strongly disagree. Overall the methods used were widely accepted by both the practitioners and the academics, with the majority of participants strongly agreeing or agreeing with the survey statements (see Table 2).

In addition to the specific questions, the survey included overall satisfaction questions with a seven-point scale from "extremely unsatisfied" to "extremely satisfied." The overall satisfaction with the offsite experience was also high (see Figure 2). Overall, 81 percent of the survey participants were either extremely satisfied or very satisfied with their summit experience. None of the survey participants were unsatisfied and only one survey response was neutral.

Since the majority of responses to the survey were strongly agree and agree, a difference test was conducted to check if there was a difference between the practitioners and academic researchers. The responses were categorized as either strongly agree or other. A Pearson chi-square test was used to determine if there was a significant difference between the two groups. There was significant difference between the practitioners and academic researchers on three of the survey questions (see Table 3).

There was a significant difference at the .05 level between the practitioners and academic researchers on survey question Q3 (see Table 3). The practitioners tended to strongly agree that the summit resulted in a compelling research agenda, while the academic researchers tended to only agree. One possible explanation might be the practitioner-driven process that started with the dilemmas faced by the practitioners. This approach might have bounded the research agenda discussion in a way that did not allow for the academic researchers to raise questions that they were interested in but that were not clearly associated with any dilemma. Future forums should consider incorporating methods to solicit and discuss researcher-driven questions.

There was a significant difference at the .10 level between the practitioners and academic researchers on question Q7. There was also a significant difference at the .10 level between the practitioners and academic researchers on question Q8. Again, on both questions the practitioners tended to strongly agree and the academic researchers tended to agree with the statement. The difference between the groups is not surprising given that the summit methodology and facilitation approach was similar to the design of the typical corporate off site. In addition, the summit was designed to move the group forward to a defined deliverable—a draft research agenda in a limited amount of time. Future forums should consider approaches to increase the academic researchers satisfaction with the experience.

THE PATH FORWARD

The institute uses an iterative five-phase collaborative research process that incorporates the insights of executives at key milestones during each research project. This helps ensure the research process produces new and interesting insights that are important to many participants and can be applied in practice. The process produces two key deliverables: 1) applications to practices disseminated through practitioner oriented publications and forums such as workshops, and 2) contributions to theory disseminated through academic journals. The research "community" at the institute includes Monfort College of Business faculty and Senior Research Fellows, visiting doctoral students, and visiting researchers from a variety of universities. Research projects currently under way address several of the research agenda topics including: organizational learning, senior leadership turnover, leadership system design, and the deployment of processes to international locations. These projects are at various stages in the research process from the scoping and prospectus phase to a completed pilot study. The institute supports these research projects by: a) planning and conducting periodic forums that bring together researchers and practitioners to discuss the projects and emerging topics; b) facilitating connections and data collection between the BAR Consortium members and researchers; c) providing secure data warehousing for sensitive data; and d) engaging the Senior Research Fellows in monthly discussions to guide the direction of the research efforts at the institute and improve the design of the research process and collaborative forums.

The research agenda and management dilemmas identify many opportunities for future research. The wide variety of topics, questions, and dilemmas drive a research methods "menu" that ranges from inductive theory building to deductive theory testing. The ultimate goal of this research is to produce the most credible and generalizable knowledge and insight possible. For many of the areas identified in this article, however, there is limited existing empirical research. In addition, there are situations where the type of knowledge and insights needed are more qualitative in nature and specific to the particular situation. Consequently, if one is to provide the type of new knowledge that practitioners need to guide and improve their organizations, one needs a wide variety of research approaches and a broad definition of scholarship (Boyer 1990). There are topics and questions that will require that researchers take a flexible theory-building approach using qualitative data to develop a concept or theory before it can be tested (Mintzberg 2005; Robson 2002; Miles and Huberman 1994; Corbin and Strauss 1990; Morgan and Smircich 1980). In other situations, the question might drive a mixed methods approach (Tashakkori and Creswell 2007).

Regardless of the approach taken, the research should integrate and enfold the existing literature and theory into the analysis and conclusions (Eisenhardt 1989). At the other end of the acceptable research spectrum are the more traditional fixed theory testing quantitative studies that provide empirical evidence to assess theories with representative groups. These methods, along with the quantitative modeling and simulation techniques, are often the most appropriate method for the particular research question and at this point are generally more acceptable to many of the top journals. In the end, the method proposed should be based on the specific dual purposes of the particular research and the amount of existing knowledge that exists concerning the particular problem and question.

CONCLUSIONS AND LIMITATIONS

The author discussed the design of a collaborative process that has brought together high-level practitioners of performance excellence and academic researchers, and the development of a purposeful research agenda that addresses both the needs and interests of practitioners and researchers. It is clear from this discussion that maintaining high performance in a constantly changing complex environment cannot be taken for granted. Rather, it must be continuously nurtured and renewed at all levels of the organization. As one of the participants put it, leaders have to come in and "blow the balloon up every day." In addition, the pressure on organizations to create value for multiple stakeholders is increasing (Freeman, Harrison, and Wicks 2007). While MBNQA recipients have systematic approaches to support the community and address the environment, during the past two decades "performance excellence" was defined primarily by high performance in the three key areas of the service profit chain—employees, customers, and investors (Heskett et al. 1994), or as Federal Express defined it, "people, service, profit" (AMA 1991, 12). The bar is quickly being raised to enhance the definition of performance excellence by elevating the status of the environment and society to what is now a "triple bottom line" (Elkington, Emerson, and Beloe 2006).

The external pressures combined with the internal dilemmas of leadership and work force turnover, cultural issues, and a limited understanding of management system refinement and integration at the upper MBNQA scoring levels create many management questions that practitioners need to have answered in order to succeed. These questions create several challenges for academic researchers including limited time, competing goals and requirements, limited funding, and limited access to data. Practitioners and academic researchers need each other. The practitioners need new knowledge and insights and the academic researchers need to produce new knowledge and insights. The collaborative approach discussed in this article brings the two groups together to address their collective needs. The collaborative approach did have several limitations during its initial iteration.

Because of the constraints that were purposefully placed on the total number of participants in order to ensure that the large group discussions were manageable, representation of BAR recipients was limited to eight profit-seeking companies, three higher education organizations, and one K-12 school district. Since the 2006 summit, additional organizations have joined in the collaborative forums. Because of financial pressures on most school districts, however, the K-12 education participation is still limited. Because the BAR participants were more heavily weighted toward the business sector as opposed to the Baldrige nonprofit sectors (healthcare, education, and now, general not-for-profits), the management dilemmas, management questions, and research questions are somewhat skewed toward this sector.

Academic researchers represented key disciplines important to performance excellence research including management, marketing, strategic management, organization behavior, operations management and research, and quality management. While the members of this group are well known and have extensive experience, they are not necessarily representative of the larger community of excellent academic researchers who can impact significantly the research agenda.

Time allocated for research question development was limited and thus the research agenda is a "draft" and needs considerable refinement. In addition, the research agenda is incomplete in that it does not address all the key dilemmas that organizations face.

Despite these limitations, the summit was quite successful in that it resulted in: a) a rich frank dialogue among the practitioners and academic researchers; b) an increased understanding of the management dilemmas that high-performing organization face; c) a consensus on a research agenda; d) a concept of operations; and e) a clear path forward. To be effective, research must fulfill the dual purposes of improving organization performance through application to practice and extend the theory. A collaborative approach offers the greatest chance of meeting the needs of practitioners and researchers.

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