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How do excellent companies stay excellent?

Abstract

Organisations throughout the world adopt business excellence frameworks to guide their business strategy and continuous improvement. Some seek and receive awards which recognise high levels of achievement against the criteria of these frameworks. Even at these levels of performance, organisations face challenges to maintaining high levels of achievement and these are the subject of this paper. Using a sample of Australian Business Excellence Award winners, interviews with key managers provide insights into the challenges which these organisations face in their ongoing quest for excellence. Six key themes emerged; embedding excellence, ensuring it is not onerous, engaging people, providing meaning, driving and consistency. The paper explores these and how they are managed.

Keywords: Business excellence, sustaining quality, challenges, Australia

Introduction

Organisations throughout the world use business excellence frameworks such as the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM) Excellence Model, Baldrige Performance Excellence Award and Australian Business Excellence Framework (ABEF) as holistic models to guide their strategy, business processes and business improvement. Based on quality management principles, they provide a disciplined approach to business conduct around seven key areas and within each of these, the application of a disciplined model based on approach, deployment, results and improvement (ADRI).

Whilst the primary aim of adopting an excellence framework is to provide guidance for building organisational performance as measured by various success indicators, it is also a process which can involve benchmarking and internal self-assessment around the core elements of the framework. Others seek recognition through awards based on the framework and those achieving awards have demonstrated high levels of performance and achievement. Despite this, they still face challenges which require careful management and it is these which are the focus of this paper.

A number of studies have examined factors which are important in quality management success and failure and sustaining quality (Seraph, Benson and Schroeder, 1989, Van der Wiele and Brown, 2002, Venkateswarlu and Nilikant, 2005 and, Sebastianelli and Tamimi, 2003, Zairi, 2002, Tamimi, 1998, Naor et al 2008, Asif et al, 2009, Taylor and Wright, 2003, Sohal and Terziovski, 2000, Black and Porter, 1996). This research points to the importance of leadership commitment, training, engagement, Human Resource Management (HRM) and customer focus in ensuring organisations experience success with quality. Themes running through this research are; leadership and systems to drive, human infrastructure and collateral organisational changes.

Critical success factor (CSF) research (Saraph, Benson and Schroeder, 1989, Black and Porter, 1996, Tamimi, 1998, Jiju et al 2002, Sohal and Terziovski, 2000) identifies a range of factors which are integral to success. Most of these studies focus on factors which are important at an implementation stage rather than in sustaining quality. Whilst there have been some differences in emphases in outcomes between the studies, they typically show the following as CSFs; top leadership commitment, training and education, HRM, process management, quality data reporting, communication and customer satisfaction orientation.

This literature points to several issues worth exploring in examining challenges to excellence which include; the role of drivers and leadership, supportive infrastructure and integration of quality into strategy and customer service approaches. The presence and significance of these and other factors as impediments and challenges and how they are managed so as not to derail the drive for excellence is the focus of this research.

Methodology

The aim of this study was to examine the nature of challenges faced by organisations which had reached high levels of performance against the business excellence framework and how they were managing these challenges.

A sample of recipients of Australian Business Excellence Awards (bronze to gold), were approached to participate in this study. It was assumed that these organisations had a high level of experience with the excellence framework and would therefore be in a position to provide insights into challenges from a mature perspective rather than simply those which might be encountered at a start-up phase. Information was gathered from interviews with current quality/excellence/business improvement managers who had primary responsibility for driving and coordinating the excellence focus and in some cases, people who were previously responsible for business excellence in the respective organisations. The senior

management team were also interviewed in some cases. Additional information was sourced from company web sites, published materials and study tour visits and company presentations.

Organisation Backgrounds

Table 1: Organisational details of participants

Organisation	Industry	Employee numbers	Years using ABEF	Multi site	Number CEO's last 10 years	Australian Excellence Award
A	Financial services	450-700 (seasonal)	9	No	1	Gold
B	Pharmaceuticals	220	9	No	2	Gold
C	Local government	650	12	No	2	Gold
D	Aged care	900	7	Yes - 8	1	Silver
E	Transport	350	18	Yes - 2	2	Gold
F	Manufacturing/service	800	12	Yes -5	1	Bronze
G	Construction	300	6	No	1	Gold

Organisation A

This is an Australian company with global operations in specialised financial services primarily handling information and communication between public companies and shareholders. It deals with processing and communicating information on shareholder dividends, shareholder transactions and register and an enquiry call centre for shareholders of public companies. This case is focused on the operations centre which is primarily involved with the company call centre and operations which handles a range of business services including queries from shareholders, distribution of mail relating to dividends, meetings and so on. The work is seasonal and so employee numbers fluctuate significantly.

In 2002 this business unit was facing a range of issues including; limited process standardisation, process control, lack of a high performance commercially oriented culture, several locations which needed centralisation, poor planning and poor use of technology. At that point the operations centre was perceived as not being valued as a partner by the rest of the company. People strategies were somewhat haphazard and employee morale was low and turnover high. Following the appointment of a new senior manager to this division a change model was adopted based on stabilisation, tactical improvement, strategic change and transformation. It also placed emphasis on developing an effective people strategy. The strategic change phase involved business excellence as a framework and the ABEF was adopted for this purpose.

Organisation B

This organisation is part of a large international pharmaceutical and health care company. It employs 220 people and is responsible for processing base ingredients for a variety of pharmaceutical products based on poppies which are sourced from the surrounding farms. It has two main operating divisions; operations and business/marketing.

The use of the ABEF was initially driven by corporate headquarters in the USA and based on the Baldrige model. Whilst the initiative has not been strongly supported and driven from the senior manager, other members of the senior management team have been important drivers.

Organisation C

This organisation is a large local government in an Australian capital city and has approximately 650 employees. Local governments have always been subject to significant political changes and pressures to administer local government acts and maintain low levels of rates (taxes) on residents and to deliver quality services. The 1990's saw increased pressures on local governments to be competitive in their provision of services. In 1999 the organisation adopted the ABEF for various reasons including a desire to have an external assessment of its performance and to establish a routine of internal self assessment. Quality assurance was initially applied with the outdoor workforce and architecture and design areas.

The CEO who retired two years ago was a passionate supporter of the excellence framework and approach. Their successor who came from within is also a key supporter of the ABEF approach. He has now shifted the focus to external relationships and customers. The organisation has focused on applying evaluation and assessments (3 external and 4 internal assessments in 10 years). This has meant a strong discipline to the ADRI process of the ABEF.

Organisation D

This organisation is in the aged care industry and operates over eight different work sites in a large Australian city. The organisation has been using the ABEF for 7 years and applied for the award in 2009 and received Silver. This was its first year of formal assessment. The framework is not a major driver in the organisation from an explicit perspective but is

integrated into all business processes including a balanced scorecard approach. According to the CEO, a strong motivator behind using an excellence approach is to be the best in the industry, and this is an industry which is often perceived to have a poor standard of service to customers. The organisation desired to have an external assessment of the organisation.

An important aspect of this business (aged care) is compliance with a range of government regulations so the notion of quality audits is a regular feature of operating in this industry. The ABEF was adopted to go beyond externally driven audits and to have a basis for internal improvement and self assessment.

Organisation E

This organisation operates port facilities at a major Australian city and employs 350 people at two sites. Most people are employed in administrative or service jobs as the loading and unloading of ships is done by separate companies. The port organisation earns 40% of its revenue from property, e.g. charges for shipping. It has been a private business enterprise since 1999, having previously been a state public sector organisation, yet it still has many remnants of a public sector organisation, particularly in terms of employment conditions.

The organisation enjoyed a long period of leadership with its CEO who retired in 2008 and was a passionate advocate of the business excellence model. It has been using the ABEF since the early 1990's and was the recipient of a gold award in 2007. The CEO wanted to bring about a change in the workplace culture from an adversarial waterfront to one which had a shared vision, customer and stakeholder focus and teamwork in order to become profitable and efficient.

Organisation F

This organisation is the Australian operation of one of the four large global corporations in the manufacture, installation and maintenance of people moving equipment such as elevators and escalators. It has 800 employees in branches across Australia, 500 of whom are technicians involved in installation and maintenance activities. Others are in sales and administration.

Ten years ago the company was not performing so well, it was perceived to be nothing special, managers came and went and there tended to be short term decision making aimed at survival not prosperity The appointment of a new CEO brought change with a focus on using the ABEF to; develop a company culture focused on people and open communication, create opportunities for learning and development and improve leadership throughout the business.

Organisation G

This organisation is a large commercial construction and engineering company located in an Australian city and commenced operations in 1989. The company had been using TQM principles since 2000 and had also adopted ISO 9000 in 2002. By 2005 the managing director of the company had presented to the company his vision to adopt the business excellence framework in an effort to differentiate the company from its competitors. This involved changes to the organisation's processes and systems to align with the excellence framework categories. The intent had been to target a bronze award in 2008 and the company applied in 2006 to get some external assessment and in fact achieved a bronze award in that year. The company achieved a gold award in 2010.

Whilst primarily based in a single city, the company is now engaged into expansion into two other Australian states and also the resources industry. This presents it with new challenges and opportunities in how to ensure the company culture is built into the new operations.

Findings and Discussion

The challenges faced by organisations can be grouped into six key themes which are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Challenges in managing excellence

Embedding	Challenge 1 - How is excellence integrated into the way the business operates so that it is a normal part of everyday business? Many organisations struggle to build continuous improvement, benchmarking, and the use of quality improvement processes into their mainstream activities.
Providing meaning	Challenge 2 – How can the principles and processes of excellence have meaning for all throughout the organisation? How does it affect me? How do I contribute? Unless both managers and employees can see how they have a role and what it is to participate in excellence then it is difficult for them to be involved and committed.
Driving	Challenge 3 - How is the effort and momentum maintained? What critical mass is required throughout an organisation to provide ongoing drive?
Engaging	Challenge 4 - Who drives and how is engagement driven and

	achieved? How can the maximum number of organisational participants, both managers and employees, be engaged?
Not being onerous	Challenge 5 – How can strategies, processes and systems be pursued without being seen as considerable extra work? Linked to embedding but ensuring that it does not create extra work, rather be an integral part of work.
Consistency	Challenge 6 – How do we ensure the message is consistent throughout the organisation especially where there are multiple locations?

- Embedding – How is excellence integrated into the way the business operates?

    - Frequent communication and reinforcement of excellence principles and strategy
    - Consistent use of process improvement, continuous improvement, ADRI, self assessment and sometimes external assessment
    - Linking strategy with Key Result Indicators (KRIs)/Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)
    - Link to performance management systems
    - Leadership visibility and communication throughout the organisation

Most organisations in this study strive to ensure that business excellence is an integral part of the way the organisation runs its business so that it underpins all operations. In some cases the framework is deliberately applied in a subtle manner so that excellence isn't promoted as a key strategy and so perceived as another fad.

Having regular communication between managers and employees is an important mechanism for reinforcing the excellence culture and embedding the core principles. Breakfasts and toolbox meetings where ideas, initiatives and feedback on the organisation is provided reinforces the principles of excellence. These meetings may provide feedback on strategic goals, process improvement activities and recognition of individuals and teams for ongoing improvements. They also provide a mechanism for employees and managers to communicate and for leaders to be visible on a regular basis.

Having process improvement as ongoing activities along with self-assessment provides discipline to excellence and requires actions and outcomes and not merely words. These may be at a relatively informal level with teams engaged on various improvement tasks or more formalised with periodic organisation wide self-assessment. Some organisations schedule regular internal self assessments to reinforce the excellence focus.

All organisations strive to link their performance management systems with the organisation's strategy. In this way they seek to ensure all managers and employees can relate their individual activities and functions with the broader corporate strategy and so provide a unified direction.

- Ensuring meaningfulness – How can the principles and processes of excellence have meaning for everyone in the organisation?

- Strategy communication – ensuring that it is a daily activity. Build into work plans.
- Strategy – balancing with operations to ensure strategy is clearly linked to operations
- Processes – involving people in process improvement
- People – use performance management systems to build into everyone's roles
- Processes – adopting a big picture approach

Ensuring all managers and employees adopt excellence principles is an ongoing challenge so building strategy into operational and daily work plans is an important part of trying to ensure that individuals can identify where their work roles contribute to the achievement of strategic goals. Simplification of strategic goals to plans on a page and daily work plans helps to remove some of the mystique often associated with strategic plans. This is reinforced through performance management processes whereby individuals identify how they personally contribute to the organisational strategy. Strategy is also transmitted into operational activities so people are able to see the linkage between the two and this is an important task of middle and front line managers.

Organisations found that they need to pay particular attention to showing the links between strategy and operations. People, particularly at operational levels, need to see meaning for them in the strategy so an important task of leaders at functional and front line levels of the organisation is to convey meaning. Plans on a page (POP) are one technique used to facilitate communication and ensure that normally lengthy and complex strategic documents are not overwhelming. Other strategies include; management by walking about (MBWA) and discussing strategic matters with people and ensuring that the strategy is a working document and is the basis for operational matters.

Involving people in process improvement teams is another way of ensuring excellence has meaning. All organisations use teams for process and continuous improvement and these may be process focused or at individual work unit levels. Direct involvement allows people to see how they can contribute to improvements in the organisation and actually impact on their personal work roles.

- Driving – How is the effort, focus and momentum maintained?

    - Leadership at senior level – single person or team
    - Leadership – champions to support and provide impetus to the drive. Not necessarily the CEO or most senior leader.
    - Leadership – building support from middle managers
    - Leadership MBWA
    - Processes – cross functional teams
    - Discipline through internal auditors, benchmarking

Driving continuous improvement is cited in most studies as a critical success factor. The most senior manager is generally of critical importance as they can send a very clear signal of what is important in the organisation and in many of the organisations studied here, a high degree of passion and drive has been provided by the CEO and this has been a key factor in making a difference. However, there have been a couple of examples where the CEO has left and their successors may or may not have shown the same degree of drive and enthusiasm. In these cases, excellence has been embedded to a significant degree and enough members of the senior leadership team are supportive for continuity to be maintained. A further key element is to ensure that the senior leadership team are united in driving excellence so that should one person leave, the team will still provide momentum. A view expressed in one

organisation was that whilst a supportive and passionate leader is central to driving business excellence, there still needs to be a routine of self assessment in order that people are accountable and actions take place rather than remain simply words. This helps to ensure continuity.

Building and maintaining support from middle managers was regarded as a relatively common challenge. It was suggested that patience was required to build middle level management commitment to excellence and that this typically took up to five years. It is important for the most senior managers to help establish long term commitment by reinforcing unwavering commitment and signal that it won't be a passing fashion. Regular communication between managers and with their staff helps along with having performance management criteria for managers which includes important excellence principles.

The need to have leaders throughout the organisation who are passionate about excellence and driving it is a challenge which most organisations face. Ensuring that leadership appointments are made on the basis of leadership skills and abilities and fit with the organisational culture including the business excellence approach rather than simply having functional and specialist skills is something which some organisations have recognised and are addressing this with role profiling.

The need for drive throughout large organisations, and particularly where they have multiple locations is critical. Many organisations identified some degree of frustration with a lack of consistency in drive across the organisation. Sometimes the "out of sight, out of mind" principle applies where locations away from the corporate headquarters and senior managers may be less enthusiastic about excellence. Even in single site locations, there is a constant need to ensure managers throughout the organisation are drivers. One way of handling this

challenge is to ensure that senior leaders and the leadership team are visible throughout the organisation through regular visits or other strategies.

- Engaging – How is engagement driven and who is responsible for this?

    - Strategy development, involvement in the process
    - Strategy engagement, in implementation
    - Strategy communication
    - Customers – understanding their needs
    - People – open cultures, free communication, participation
    - Leadership (at all levels) communicating with employees

Whilst some in the organisation may be highly engaged and enthused about business excellence, ensuring that engagement is widespread is a bigger challenge. As with most organisational change, a small proportion of people might be labelled pioneers and lead the process. However, there are always a large portion of the organisation who are fence sitters and stragglers adopting a wait and see attitude. Cultural change can be driven by words and strategies but these need to be converted into ways of getting people voluntarily committed and engaged in the processes and behaviours which are part of this change. Involving people in the processes are important in dealing with this challenge and this can take various forms including developing strategic plans and process and continuous improvement teams.

Whilst strategic plans are often developed by the senior management team, their effectiveness depends on the extent of engagement of both managers and employees throughout the organisation. To deal with this, some organisations have endeavoured to involve people from throughout the organisation in the development of strategy. This might mean vertical “slices”

of people involved in the process so as to ensure that the voices of all levels of the organisation are heard in the strategy formulation process. In one case about seventy people from all levels and all areas of the organisation are involved in the strategy development process. In order to reinforce engagement with strategy and enhance its communication, most organisations link it to their performance management process so that each individual can see how their roles link to the overall company strategy. Work plans for divisions and departments throughout organisations also provide an important link at operational levels.

- Not being onerous – How do organisations ensure that it isn't onerous and seen as extra work?

    - Strategy – to be seen as part of normal operational activities, e.g. work plan
    - Strategy prioritisation – so focus on the vital few and not try to do everything
    - Strategy – avoiding strategy strangulation
    - Information – ensuring not overloading managers and employees

Whilst engagement and drive are critical to success, caution needs to be exercised to ensure that managers and employees alike don't see excellence as creating additional workloads but rather see that it can actually improve workloads. Quality improvement shouldn't create extra reporting requirements and the establishment of internal bureaucracies which often resulted from quality initiatives in the eighties and nineties. For strategy, some organisations seek to prioritise key targets so that there isn't a perception that too much is being sought. Furthermore, an emphasis in most organisations is placed on the strategy as a working plan to facilitate operations rather than being seen as the basis for a whole heap of reporting.

Use of data and information and analysis is a core aspect of excellence, yet at the same time it is important that employees and managers don't feel overwhelmed by the need to provide

information through various reporting mechanisms. Many organisations today have become bogged down in producing and requiring documentation which tends to take time away from dealing with core activities and customers. Ensuring that only critical information is the focus is a way of keeping it from becoming a burden. Exception based reporting is one way several organisations have been dealing with this.

Several organisations have moved to prioritise strategy in order to focus on a few key issues and not try to achieve everything. One identified the critical few key strategies (very few objectives) and the other prioritised strategic goals by using a matrix which identifies urgency and impact on strategy to help select the key strategic priorities. One organisation refers to its strategy document as a work plan and the emphasis is placed on using it as a diagnostic tool rather than a reporting document. A few key KPIs drive strategy at all levels throughout the organisation with the remainder being used in operational areas.

Several organisations noted the need to take a "big picture" approach to processes in order to prevent getting bogged down in excessive detail and specific compliance and work role functions. Process improvement necessarily involves processes which are important to the organisation and which transcend functional areas so the focus needs to be strategic. A view expressed was that whilst improving smaller and more specific processes is part of a process improvement culture, the core processes in the organisation need to be considered as a priority. One organisation has set an objective to significantly reduce the number of processes and several organisations reported that they were simplifying processes where possible including aiming to be able to map them on a page.

- Consistency – How do organisations ensure that all divisions and locations work to the same tune?

- Communication processes, e.g. MBWA, site visits
- Leadership – bringing the leadership team together on a regular basis
- Using cross functional teams to avoid isolation and silo mindsets
- Information – ensuring ease of access to information, e.g. intranet

Consistency is an issue for both single and multi location organisations. In single sites, a challenge is to ensure that managers and leaders throughout the organisation are focusing on the key direction based on the business excellence strategy. Focusing on key strategic issues helps to maintain this consistency but it is through the enactment of these strategies where consistency is critical. Communication and interpretation of the strategy is important to ensure understanding is consistent. In a few organisations, the ongoing physical presence of the senior leadership team throughout the organisation helps facilitate this. It may be through regular discussions with middle managers or through staff meetings that key messages are conveyed. Furthermore, providing a range of internal material on an intranet facility is important in communicating information and assisting to maintain consistency throughout an organisation.

Where multiple locations are involved, the physical presence of the senior leadership team may be more challenging from a logistical point of view. However, one organisation ensures that the senior leadership team visits all eight sites in a major city on a regular basis and that this is seen as a core activity for the team. They generally spend more time at the work sites than in their corporate office and indicated that email is not heavily used, instead a face-to-face meeting or phone call was the preferred method of communication. Their aim is to engage in discussions about the work plan (strategy) on a regular basis at each work site. In another organisation, the distance between sites is much greater and therefore travelling is

less frequent, but nevertheless it is seen as a key factor in maintaining both the drive for excellence and strategic consistency.

Organisations which have a high proportion of their people operating with a significant degree of autonomy “in the field” (e.g. service technicians) tend to face the challenge of consistency and ensuring people are supportive of the quality and excellence thrust. One organisation has about seventy percent of its employees in the field and they report to service leaders whose span of control is around eight people. In this case the service leaders, as front line managers, play an important role in communicating company policy and ensuring those for whom they have responsibility are working in tune with this. To address the issue of communication between field leaders and technicians, they have “toolbox” meetings on a fortnightly basis to discuss matters of interest and customer complaints. At the organisational level, the Quality Steering Committee monitors customer complaints to identify trouble spots. The quality manager had also provided training on the benefits of continuous improvement to these leaders and technicians.

Conclusions

The insights gained in this study show that it is not always “plain sailing” for those organisations which have reached excellence award status as they face ongoing challenges in their quest for excellence. Six key themes in the challenges to maintaining business excellence have been identified in this research and include; ensuring ongoing leadership drive and support throughout the organisation, gaining commitment and engagement and sustaining the momentum and making strategy meaningful to people at all organisational levels. Whilst most organisations faced these issues, in many cases each had different strategies for dealing with them and many felt that they still had ongoing matters to address.

These challenges are faced by relatively mature organisations which have adopted excellence but they are also relevant for those seeking to implement excellence.

Whilst this study provides insights into how high performing organisations manage challenges in sustaining excellence, there is scope for further research on the topic. This might focus on; industry comparisons, international comparisons and whether these challenges remain over longer periods of time.

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Appendix: Elements of the Australian Business Excellence Framework

Strategy and Planning -strategic direction -the planning process
Leadership -throughout the organisation -the organisation culture -society, community and environmental responsibility
People -a great place to work -building organisational capability through people
Process management, improvement and innovation -identification and management of processes -process improvement and innovation -process outputs
Information and knowledge -generating, collecting and analysing the right data -creating value through applying knowledge

Customer and market focus -gaining and using knowledge of customers -effective management of customer relations -customer perception of value
Success and sustainability -measuring and communicating organisational performance -decision making based on key stakeholders' perceptions of planned outcomes

Source: SAI Global