



2026 MALCOLM BALDRIGE NATIONAL QUALITY AWARD CRITERIA

Administered by



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INTRODUCTION

Since its founding in 1987, the Baldrige Performance Excellence Program (BPEP) has served the U.S. economy through its enduring mission: to improve the performance and long-term success of businesses and other organizations by recognizing role models and fostering the sharing and adoption of proven leadership, management, and operational practices. Of course, what it takes to be successful has changed dramatically since then, and therefore, so has Baldrige, the Baldrige Excellence Framework, and the Baldrige Award process.

The Baldrige Excellence Framework provides a comprehensive leadership and management tool that compiles proven best practices into an organization-wide improvement guide applicable to any organization or community. The Framework undergoes a regular revision process to ensure that the concepts and practices highlighted remain relevant for organizations striving to achieve higher levels of performance for their long-term success.

Beginning in 2026, the Alliance for Performance Excellence is administering the Baldrige National Quality Award process on behalf of the U.S. Department of Commerce and the National Institute of Standards and Technology.

PURPOSE

The purpose of the Baldrige Award Process is to identify and recognize role-model organizations that embody many of the concepts and practices found in the Framework. These role-model organizations and communities have achieved and sustained exceptional performance across multiple areas of importance to the organization and its key stakeholders. Award recipients must be willing to share the non-proprietary processes and practices that produced their outstanding results and outcomes. For these reasons, the Award Criteria questions request information regarding both processes and results achieved. Also requested are responses to important context-setting questions in the Organizational Profile that help Baldrige examiners and judges understand your situation and the processes and results presented. These context questions are not evaluated.

APPLICATION

It is essential to read the application instructions and criteria questions carefully and respond as completely as possible. However, a complete response does not have to use up all the allotted space and/or image uploads in the award application. “Complete” means you have addressed the question in full and provided all the information requested, such as

three-to-five years of data and relevant comparisons. If you are unable to provide a complete response, you should explain why in the field provided. Missing information that is not explained is likely to impact your evaluation.

EVALUATION

The evaluation process for the Award is separated into two phases—the Application Evaluation phase (where national examiners form a hypothesis on your organization’s performance), and the Site Visit phase (where examiners verify performance with your leadership). The Application Evaluation phase is primarily focused on evaluating your performance results and underlying processes in six Award Criteria categories: Leadership, Strategy, Customers, Organizational Intelligence (formerly Measurement, Analysis, & Knowledge Management), Workforce, and Operations. This recognizes that, in most cases, the results achieved are a strong indicator of the effectiveness of an organization’s processes, especially when demonstrated over a significant period of time. During a site visit, all process responses will be assessed to determine possible best practices leading to high-performance results.

FINALISTS

Award Finalists will advance to the Site Visit phase, which includes both virtual and on-site engagement with your organization. In 2026, applicants participating in either Eligibility Pathway #1 (having received an Alliance member’s Top Tier Award within the last four years) or Eligibility Pathway #2 (having received a national site visit within the last two years) are granted automatic Finalist status and will earn a site visit. Applicants participating with Alternate Eligibility Pathway #3 will have an additional evaluation in the Application Evaluation phase to determine if Finalist status (and a site visit) has been earned.

During the site visit, examiners will explore information from your application that needs clarification. Lastly, for those familiar with the Baldrige Excellence Framework, it is important to recognize that while the Award Criteria are derived from and can be traced back directly to the content in the Framework, there may not be a one-to-one relationship between them, and the wording may vary slightly.

CHANGES FOR 2026

In response to feedback from participants in the 2024-2025 Baldrige Award process, as well as facilitated Focus Group discussion, we have made several significant changes related to the Award Criteria and application for 2026. The changes are as follows:

- Further streamlined and aligned the Award Criteria, now with six Categories that match the main Baldrige Framework.
- Eliminated most compound questions (questions that ask for multiple things within the same question) by parsing those into separate questions and/or eliminating some questions. This had the effect of reducing the overall information required to be submitted in 2026.
- Moved organization-specific “context questions” to the Organizational Profile, making it easier for the applicant to answer them one time and only in one place.
- Further streamlined and simplified Evaluation Rubrics, which will not only improve evaluation consistency but also serve as a thoughtful maturity pathway for all organizations and communities.
- Lengthened access to the Award application portal platform, providing approximately two-and-a-half months for submission.

2026 AWARD PROCESS KEY DATES

March 19 – Award Criteria published and Intent to Apply window opened.

April 15, 8:00 pm ET – Intent to Apply due.

July 1, 8:00 pm ET – Award Application submissions due.

September/October – Site Visit phase.

October/November – Judges Panel meets to recommend 2026 Baldrige Award recipients.

Thank you for your interest in the Baldrige Award process.

OVERVIEW OF AWARD CRITERIA

Below are seven categories. The first category, Organizational Profile, includes context questions that seek important information relevant to the evaluation of the remaining six Criteria categories. The Organizational Profile questions are not evaluated.

The next six categories have a combination of questions that ask for performance results and descriptions of key processes. Please read the instructions and Criteria questions carefully and provide complete responses. Note that your process descriptions should be responsive to the evaluation rubric shown, demonstrating that the process is regular and repeated and has been improved based on the evaluation. Your results should be responsive to the scoring rubric shown, show at least three to five years of trend data, and include your performance against relevant comparisons. Because we are seeking to identify national role models, relevant comparisons are best-in-class or top decile/top quartile and competitors, where available.

Please note that an organization does not need to demonstrate role-model performance in all areas to become a Baldrige Award recipient. If you are unable to respond completely to a results or process question, you should explain why in the field provided. Missing information that is not explained is likely to impact your evaluation.

ORGANIZATIONAL PROFILE



The information requested in this Category provides a high-level snapshot of your organization. Be sure the information in the Organization Profile (OP) is consistent with the results in the following categories. The OP should not include information about key processes or results.

ORGANIZATIONAL DESCRIPTION QUESTIONS

Examiners will use the responses to these questions during the Award Evaluation phase. Responses to the questions have a 3,000-character limit and may include up to three charts, graphs, or tables per question.

1. What are your key products, services, and/or programs?
2. Provide your market size over the past five years for your main products and services.
3. What is your mission, vision, and values or guiding principles?
4. What are the defining characteristics of your organizational culture?
5. Describe your workforce profile key workforce segments (e.g., location, types of workers, including students and volunteers as applicable, etc.).
6. Describe your key engagement drivers for your workforce.
7. Describe any planned or occurring changes in your workforce capabilities, capacity, or composition.
8. What are your key applicable regulations, as well as accreditations, certifications, or registration requirements?
9. Describe and/or depict your leadership and governance structure.
10. Describe your key community relationships and partnership including type, frequency of engagement, and length of relationship.
11. Describe your key customer segments, including differences among the segments.
12. Describe the key customer requirements and expectations for your products and/or services and customer support services.

ORGANIZATIONAL SITUATION QUESTIONS

Examiners will use the responses to these questions during the Award Evaluation phase. Responses to the questions have a 3,000-character limit and may include up to three charts, graphs, or tables per question.

1. What are your key strategic challenges, threats, advantages, and opportunities (e.g., artificial intelligence)?
2. What are your organization's short- and longer-term key strategic objectives and their most important related goals?
3. What are your key organizational short- and longer-term financial measures?
4. What are your key sources of comparative and competitive data, both from within your industry and outside your industry? Provide what limitations, if any, may affect your ability to obtain or use these data.
5. What other factors, if any, impact your organization's success and sustainability?
6. Is there anything you consider unusual about your environment or business model that would aid in understanding your organization?

1 LEADERSHIP



The Leadership Category asks about your performance and processes related to senior leadership communication, governance and accountability, grievances, and complaints. It also asks about succession planning and societal contributions.

RESULTS QUESTIONS

Responses to the questions below should be consistent with the information shared in the corresponding OP questions. Each question has a 4,000-character limit and must include at least one chart, graph, or table (up to four individual images may be provided). **All responses should contain three to five years of data and relevant comparisons. A detailed explanation must be provided if you are unable to provide a minimum of three years of data and relevant comparisons. Because we are seeking to identify national role models, relevant comparisons are best-in-class or top decile/top quartile and competitors, where available.**

1. What are your results for senior leaders' two-way communication with key workforce segments (e.g., workforce ratings of leaders by location, types of workers, etc.)?
2. What are your results for external audits related to leadership and governance accountability (including certification, accreditations, and fiscal accountability)?
Note: Comparisons are not required.
3. What are your results for grievances and complaints for all the following: (1) safety, (2) the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), and (3) ethics?
4. What are your results for key measures or indicators of your societal well-being? Examples of societal contributions (comparisons optional) include: reduced energy consumption; use of renewable energy resources and recycled water; reduction of your carbon footprint; waste reduction and utilization; and alternative approaches to conserving resources (e.g., increased virtual meetings).

PROCESS QUESTIONS

Process questions each have a 3,000-character limit and may include up to three individual charts, graphs, or tables.

1. How do senior leaders set and deploy the organization's mission, vision, and values through your leadership system?
2. Describe your key process(es) for senior leaders' two-way communication with the workforce.
3. How do senior leaders create an environment for success now and in the future?
4. Describe your key process(es) for your leadership succession planning.
5. Describe your key process(es) for ensuring responsible governance related to accountability for senior leaders' actions, fiscal accountability, and transparency.
6. Describe your key processes for supporting your key communities.

2 STRATEGY



The Strategy Category asks how your organization develops strategic objectives that are responsive to your challenges and opportunities. You are asked about your process for implementing those objectives and about metrics for checking progress. Strategic planning is a core business process that directly affects an organization's resilience and long-term

success.

RESULTS QUESTIONS

Responses to the questions below should be consistent with the information shared in the corresponding OP questions. Each question has a 4,000-character limit and must include at least one chart, graph, or table (up to four individual images may be provided). **All responses should contain three to five years of data and relevant comparisons. A detailed explanation must be provided if you are unable to provide a minimum of three years of data and relevant comparisons. Because we are seeking to identify national role models, relevant comparisons are best-in-class or top decile/top quartile and competitors, where available.**

1. What are your results for key measures or indicators of marketplace performance?
2. What are your results for financial viability (e.g., liquidity, days cash on hand/reserves, credit or bond rating)?
3. What are your results for financial performance (e.g., revenues, operating margin, performance to budget) by organization units, as appropriate?

Note: Comparisons are optional for the above results questions

PROCESS QUESTIONS

Process questions each have a 3,000-character limit and may include up to three individual charts, graphs, or tables.

1. How do you conduct your strategic planning?
2. How do you develop and deploy your action plans to achieve your strategic objectives?
3. How do you evaluate the effectiveness of your organizational strategy and implementation of action plans?

4. Describe how you identify strategic opportunities and pursue innovation through your strategic plan.
5. Describe how you strategically assess innovations and technological changes, including Artificial Intelligence, affecting your products, services, operations, or markets.
6. Describe how you ensure access to capital for short-term needs, periods of disruption, and long-term success.

3 CUSTOMERS



The Customers Category asks about your performance for key processes related to your customers, including your main products and services, customer satisfaction and dissatisfaction, and customer relationship results.

RESULTS QUESTIONS

Responses to the questions below should be consistent with the information shared in the corresponding OP questions. Each question has a 4,000-character limit and must include at least one chart, graph, or table (up to four individual images may be provided). **All responses should contain three to five years of data and relevant comparisons. A detailed explanation must be provided if you are unable to provide a minimum of three years of data and relevant comparisons. Because we are seeking to identify national role models, relevant comparisons are best-in-class or top decile/top quartile and competitors, where available.**

1. What are your results for customer satisfaction by key customer segments?
2. What are your results for customer dissatisfaction, including complaint management, by key customer segments?
3. What are your results for customer engagement by key customer segments (e.g., likelihood to recommend, repeat customers, and referrals)?

Note: For health care organizations that participate in the CMS Consumer Assessment of Healthcare Providers and Systems (CAHPS), include your most recent scores.

PROCESS QUESTIONS

Process questions each have a 3,000-character limit and may include up to three individual charts, graphs, or tables.

1. Describe your key process(es) for listening to, interacting with, and observing customers to obtain actionable feedback.
2. Describe your key customer engagement process(es), which may include how you acquire and retain customers, and manage customer relationships.
3. Describe your key customer support process(es), including how customers may seek information and obtain support.

4. Describe your complaint management process(es), including how you resolve complaints, recover customer confidence, and prevent future complaints.

4 ORGANIZATIONAL INTELLIGENCE



The Organizational Intelligence (formerly Measurement, Analysis, and Knowledge Management) category asks about your processes for measuring, analyzing, reviewing, and improving organizational performance and your management processes for information and organizational knowledge assets.

PROCESS QUESTIONS

Process questions each have a 3,000-character limit and may include up to three individual charts, graphs, or tables.

1. Describe your process for tracking, analyzing, and reviewing your organization's performance and capabilities.
2. Describe your process for using the findings from your performance reviews to develop priorities for continuous improvement and opportunities for innovation.
3. Describe your process for determining which innovation opportunities to pursue and deciding which opportunities to stop pursuing.
4. Describe your process(es) for collecting and sharing information throughout your workforce and stakeholders

5 WORKFORCE



The Workforce category asks about your performance for key processes related to your workforce. This category is about the performance of your key processes for engaging and developing/training your workforce members, as well as ensuring their health and safety in the workplace.

Results requested pertain to the performance of these processes as reflected in measures of workforce satisfaction, engagement, turnover, and absenteeism. This category also asks about the development of your organization's current and future leaders, workforce training, safety-related incidents, and additional indicators of workplace health and safety.

RESULTS QUESTIONS

Responses to the questions below should be consistent with the information shared in the corresponding OP questions. Each question has a 4,000-character limit and must include at least one chart, graph, or table (up to four individual images may be provided). **All responses should contain three to five years of data and relevant comparisons. A detailed explanation must be provided if you are unable to provide a minimum of three years of data and relevant comparisons. Because we are seeking to identify national role models, relevant comparisons are best-in-class or top decile/top quartile and competitors, where available.**

1. What are your results for a supportive organizational culture? (e.g., trust in leadership, creating a sense of belonging, the workforce feels valued and respected, open communication, work-life balance, mission and value alignment).
2. What are your results for workforce satisfaction (e.g., employee survey findings)?
3. What are your results for workforce engagement (e.g., employee survey findings)?
4. What are your results for turnover?
5. What are your results for leadership development (e.g., current and future leaders)?
6. What are your results for workforce training (e.g., competencies, performance, career development, return on investment, etc.)?

PROCESS QUESTIONS

Process questions each have a 3,000-character limit and may include up to three individual charts, graphs, or tables.

1. Describe your key process(es) for fostering a culture of workforce engagement and high performance.
2. Describe your key process(es) for workforce development, learning, and career progression.
3. Describe your key process(es) for building workforce readiness to meet changing capability and capacity needs (e.g., growth, work system changes, implementation of new technologies, including AI, etc.).

6 OPERATIONS



This category asks about your performance and processes related to your main products, services, and/or programs. Results requested pertain to the performance of your products, services, or programs and the efficiency and effectiveness of your processes for producing and providing them. Results are also requested regarding your supply-network management, cybersecurity effectiveness, risk management, emergency preparedness, and continuity of operations.

RESULTS QUESTIONS

Responses to the questions below should be consistent with the information shared in the corresponding OP questions. Each question has a 4,000-character limit and must include at least one chart, graph, or table (up to four individual images may be provided). **All responses should contain three to five years of data and relevant comparisons. A detailed explanation must be provided if you are unable to provide a minimum of three years of data and relevant comparisons. Because we are seeking to identify national role models, relevant comparisons are best-in-class or top decile/top quartile and competitors, where available.**

1. What are your results for the performance of your main products, services, or programs?
2. What are your results in efficiency and effectiveness of your key work processes and support processes?
3. What are the results for the performance of key components of your supply network (e.g., on-time delivery, availability of critical materials, quality)?
4. What are your results for cybersecurity effectiveness (e.g., intrusion attempts versus incidents, breaches)?
5. What are your results for significant safety-related incidents (Occupational Safety and Health Administration [OSHA] reportable incidents)?

PROCESS QUESTIONS

Process questions each have a 3,000-character limit and may include up to three individual charts, graphs, or tables.

1. Describe your key processes for determining your key product, service, or program requirements.
2. Describe how you design products, services, or programs to meet those requirements.
3. Describe how you manage the efficiency and effectiveness of your key work and support processes and overall operations, and how you improve these processes.
4. Describe your key process(es) for supply network management. including how you select suppliers that are qualified and positioned to meet your operational needs, enhance your performance, support your strategic objectives, and enhance your customers' satisfaction.
5. Describe your key process(es) for risk management, including processes and testing for emergency preparedness and continuity of operations.
6. Describe your key process(es) for managing cybersecurity.
7. Describe your key process(es) for providing a safe and secure operating environment for your workforce and other people in your workplace.

BEST PRACTICES

This final question asks about the processes and practices shared in all Categories (1-6).

QUESTION

Of the processes shared, which (if any) do you consider best practices that other organizations could learn from?

SCORING RUBRIC

RESULTS EVALUATION RUBRIC

	Levels (Le)	Trends (T)	Comparisons (C)	Integration (I)
4	Most relevant results demonstrate excellent performance.	Most results demonstrate sustained favorable trends or sustained high performance.	Most results demonstrate better than average performance with many achieving top quartile or better.	Most results reported for areas of organizational importance.
3	Many relevant results demonstrate good-to-excellent performance.	Many results demonstrate sustained favorable trends or sustained high performance.	Many results demonstrate better-than-average performance, with some approaching top quartile.	Many results reported for areas of organizational importance.
2	Some relevant results demonstrate good performance.	Some results demonstrate favorable trends or sustained high performance.	Some results demonstrate average performance using relevant comparisons.	Some results reported for areas of organizational importance.
1	Little or no relevant results reported and/or results demonstrate inconsistent or marginal performance.	Limited, inconsistent, or adverse trends.	Little or no relevant comparative data are provided.	Little or no results reported for areas of organizational importance.

*Relevant comparisons are (1) top decile/quartile, and (2) against competitors, where available.

PROCESS EVALUATION RUBRIC

	Approach (A)	Deployment (D)	Learning (L)	Integration (I)
4	Most approaches are systematic.	Deployment to most work units is evident.	Most cycles of evaluation and improvement are fact-based. Instances of innovation, adoption of best practices, and sharing of refinements are evident.	Most approaches are aligned and integrated with strategic priorities and current and emerging organizational needs.
3	Many approaches are systematic.	Deployment to many work units is evident.	Many cycles of evaluation and improvement are fact-based. Refinements and best practices are shared with other work units.	Many approaches are aligned with organizational needs and strategic priorities.
2	Some approaches are systematic.	Deployment to some work units is evident.	Some cycles of evaluation and improvement are evident.	Some approaches are aligned with organizational needs.
1	Approaches are being established.	Deployment is beginning to be evident.	Improvements are based on reacting to problems.	Approaches operate independently.

GLOSSARY

ANECDOTAL. In response to a Criteria question, information that lacks specific methods, measures, deployment mechanisms, and evaluation, improvement, and learning factors.

APPROACH. The method your organization uses to carry out its process(es).

BENCHMARKS. Processes and results that represent the best practices and best performance levels for similar activities, inside or outside your organization's industry.

COMPARISON. See RELEVANT COMPARISON.

DEPLOYMENT. The extent to which your organization applies an approach in addressing the questions in the Criteria.

DEVELOPING PATHWAY. A performance improvement pathway that is more mature with processes that are more consistent and reliable while results are used to drive decision making.

EFFECTIVE. How well a process or measure addresses its intended purpose.

ESTABLISHING PATHWAY. A performance improvement pathway that is at the early stages of learning how an organization operates, while beginning to think about what results they want.

FACT-BASED. Supported by objective data, measurable evidence, and analysis to guide decisions.

FAVORABLE TREND. Sustained improvement or sustained high performance.

INTEGRATION. The harmonization of plans, processes, information, resource decisions, workforce capability and capacity, actions, results, measures, and analyses to support key organization-wide goals.

KEY. Major or most important; critical to achieving your intended outcome.

LEARNING. New knowledge or skills acquired and implemented through evaluation, study, experience, and innovation.

LEVELS. Numerical information that places or positions your organization's results and performance on a meaningful measurement scale.

MATURING PATHWAY. A performance improvement pathway that is mature where processes are aligned/integrated, learning leads to improving while results are often high-performing and in some cases best practice, when compared to other organizations.

PATHWAY. A pathway describes how an organization's management system develops over time as its processes become clearer, more disciplined, and more integrated.

RELEVANT COMPARISON. Industry benchmarks, competitors, best-in-class or top decile/top quartile, or stated organizational targets.

SYSTEMATIC. Well-ordered, repeatable, and exhibiting the use of data and information so that learning is possible.

TRENDS. Numerical information that shows the direction and rate of change of your organization's results or the consistency of its performance over a consecutive time period.