Leaders of 2014 Baldrige Award recipients and Commerce Department Deputy Secretary Bruce Andrews watch the procession of the United States Joint Service Color Guard at the Baldrige Award Ceremony on Sunday, April 12, 2015

Award recipients during the leadership plenary of the Baldrige Program’s Quest for Excellence® Conference this week. Following are detailed highlights from those leadership presentations.

Jayne Pope, CEO, Hill Country Memorial Hospital

There is a tourist attraction just north of town—a large granite formation called Enchanted Rock. According to Jayne Pope, CEO of 2014 Baldrige Award winner Hill Country Memorial, that rock represents the history of the nonprofit, rural hospital in the hill country of Texas and its climb to serve its community, getting better and better year after year.
“Any one of you who has made a climb knows that some of the most beautiful vistas are along the way,” she said. “We at Hill County Memorial have been able to turn, and we have seen some beautiful sights, some wonderful accomplishments. Yet, we can’t linger, because we know as leaders, the real work is what lies ahead. . . . Once you have committed to a climb . . . you are obligated to find the best, safest, most efficient road to the top. . . . We have integrated the Baldrige Criteria to help us get through our climb.”

Pope said the independent, non-tax-supported hospital is the economic and civic backbone of its communities. Opened in 1971, community members literally collected coins in mason jars to start the hospital, with over 90 percent participating in the fund drive.

Hill Country continues today as a center for caring and compassion, with every workforce member appreciating its “legacy of trust” with the community and demonstrating very impressive results:

- distinction as a 100-top U.S. hospital four years in a row, five times in its history
- number one in the nation for patient satisfaction
- physician and employee satisfaction in the top decile

Said Pope, “The Baldrige Criteria are what has propelled these results.”

The hospital answered its community obligation not by thinking small but with “a powerful promise,” she said. Adopting the “proactive, innovative attitude of [its] founders,” the hospital redefined its mission in two words: “Remarkable Always,” with “remarkable” defined as performing in the top decile in America—and that’s across all hospitals, large and small, urban and rural, every hospital industry standard.

Hill Country also lives by a motto, “keep it simple and remember what we are here for”: an aspirational and brief vision (“Empower others. Create healthy.”) and a measurable and clear mission.

“Before we engaged with the Baldrige Criteria, we thought that we wanted to be the best community hospital anywhere,” Pope said. “And then we started to use the Baldrige Criteria, and we started to dream bigger. We thought about being the best hospital in the nation.”

Pope shared leadership lessons that Hill Country has learned:

- Developing services tailored for its “independent-natured” community in and outside the hospital, with services such as hospice, home health, a farmer’s market for healthy choices, community industries for free health screenings, and a wellness center.
- Creating core competencies that differentiate the hospital in its industry and market and really living those competencies.
- Building relationships with patients and staff. Pope said the role of a leader is to remove obstacles for team members so that they can go above and beyond to serve patients; “It’s my job as a leader to serve the people who serve the people.”
• Integrating the values into everything that we do. Pope said patients know when staff are living the values, as evidenced through strong customer engagement results. As CEO, Pope personally screens physicians to ensure that their personal values align with the hospital’s values, and all team members are coached to ensure their work aligns with the values. “Not a day goes by at Hill Country Memorial when you will not hear, ‘How does that fit with our values?’” she said.

• Being accountable to the mission. Pope defined the core competency of “execution” as really living the mission; setting a big picture goal, determining how to measure it, and monitoring it along the way. “As leaders, we believe we have the accountability to build a culture that we’re all on the same page, . . . so that’s we’re able to be working in sync.”

• Being transparent. Pope said leaders share the desire to always get better for the sake of others. In a changing market, this is done by holding leaders accountable and ensuring transparency with the board, community, physicians, and workforce. “The leadership system is about doing right,” she said.

In 2007, Pope said the hospital looked at where it performed against other top hospitals. “We weren’t great,” she said. “We recognized that we needed a framework to help get us to the top, so we chose the Baldrige framework. . . . Year after year after year, we got better, until now we’re in the top 1 percent in the nation.”

In regards to the climb to always get better, Pope said, “We’re not perfect. We’re not at the summit. We have opportunities to learn. . . . We can’t linger, our real work is ahead.”

**Gerry Agnes, CEO, Elevations Credit Union**

In 1953, 12 individuals at the University of Colorado contributed about $50 to a cash box; individuals making deposits at [2014 Baldrige Award winner Elevations Credit Union](#) now number about 180,000.

Defining a credit union as a nonprofit, financial cooperative, CEO Gerry Agnes said the community-based organization may be small but competes with some of the largest financial organizations in the world. That was one thing he said he learned from Baldrige: identify who you benchmark/compete against. Credit unions have about 6% of the market, but that does not mean they can’t compete “mightily,” he said.

Agnes shared lessons he’s learned from leading the credit union on its Baldrige quality journey, which started in 2008 with the question, “Just how good are we?”

Of course, the year was 2008, the midst of the financial crisis. Although one in four residents in Elevation’s primary market was a member of the credit union, capital wasn’t growing nearly as quickly as it was for competitors, neither was there significant growth for the credit union in members or assets.

“Many people were asking us why would you spend financial capital and human resources to undertake [the challenge of adopting the Baldrige framework] in the middle of a crisis. And we thought to ourselves, we’re really at a fork in the road,” Agnes said. “If we take the wrong fork,
we might end up in mediocrity. . . . We wanted to make sure we understood who we are, where we’re going, and how we are going to get there.”

Agnes shared some of his leadership lessons:

- Build your foundation with the core values and vision; ask how are you going to get there?
- Make adopting the Baldrige framework about a journey to excellence not winning the award.
- Create a safe environment to be honest. Citing the line “you can’t handle the truth” from the movie A Few Good Men, Agnes said he was reminded that “in organizations, truth is often really hard to handle. . . . If I had one goal to measure my success, it would be, have I created an environment with my team that is safe, where we can have brutally honest conversations about salient matters that will benefit our members, our employees, our community.”
- Get input and buy-in from all employees and the board of directors. “At the end of the day, employees want to be seen, heard, and valued,” he said. “People were starting to see that we valued their input and actually took action on it. They realized it was safe to ask [difficult] questions. That enabled us to persevere.”
- Acknowledge the “pain curve.” Agnes said the credit union thought it was doing pretty well, but then employees really started looking at the data and realized they may not be doing as well as they thought. “It’s quite remarkable that over time our perceptions and reality got closer and closer,” he said.
- Celebrate victories, large and small. “Relish every one of them,” Agnes said. “Because if you celebrate with your team, you rejuvenate their spirits and keep that momentum going.”
- Actively plan. Agnes said Elevations is very proud of its “operational rhythm,” which includes actively managing its strategic plan: “Our plan is not something that sits back and collects dust.”

With honest conversations and a culture permeated by continuous improvement, Agnes said Elevation’s quality journey got some momentum, and the results were clear. By 2014, Elevations had seen 2 to 1 growth in capital, 6 to 1 growth in membership, and 2 to 1 growth in assets. This “stark contrast of results stemmed from the Baldrige framework,” he said.

Member-centricity was our winning strategy, with fully engaged employees and a very loyal member base, Agnes said; the “financial results are the byproduct of employees serving our members and doing a great job.” He added, “My job as CEO is to turn this organization over to the next CEO in better shape than it is today, and through the Baldrige framework, we [will be] able to do that.”