# Adapting Baldrige to Communities
The same principles applied to a much more complex entity

December 28, 2020 | By Christel Gollnick | 7-minute read

Have you ever had a problem that you couldn't solve on your own or an opportunity that could only be pursued if you partnered with others? Communities, as collective entities, have this same experience regularly. There are often challenges and chances to achieve something better that cannot be addressed by any single organization, industry, or sector. Working together across traditional borders and competition lines to attain shared goals is required and can be difficult without guidance.

There are many well-researched approaches for facilitating collaboration and strategic project implementation available to for-profit entities. Far fewer exist for community development efforts. Those available tend to address specific areas of interest and priority in communities instead of the whole diverse and interconnected community. There are excellent frameworks for downtown revitalization, community health, and neighborhood betterment; however, pulling all of those together with systems thinking, integrated management, and continuous quality improvement are less familiar concepts.

"Community issues are often so complex that we need an approach that can help us get at the complexity," said Co-founder of Communities of Excellence 2026 Lowell C. Kruse in a recent interview.

A coaching system for addressing long-term priorities is needed that goes beyond convening people, making plans, and implementing short-term projects. Today's big problems and challenges require more effort and less comfort for leaders. A comprehensive approach can help fill the gaps that most other community development programs miss.

Communities of Excellence 2026 Executive Director Stephanie Norling shares, "Taking the time necessary to build trust and leadership capacity while learning a framework that includes all parts of a community can contribute to transformational results.

The Baldrige Excellence Framework – our nation's top-level recognition for quality excellence in manufacturing, business, health care, education, government, and nonprofit organizations – is a proven approach for addressing the many complexities of traditional hierarchal organizations with multiple internal and external stakeholders. Since the 1980's, the different departments of corporations and other entities have discovered the value of working together through the common language of Baldrige's questions. Communities of Excellence 2026 was formed in 2010 to find a way to help communities improve their quality-of-life key indicators. Its co-founders hypothesized that the Baldrige Excellence Framework "could be modified to achieve performance excellence in communities to benefit the health and well-being of all residents with a primary focus on education, health, economic vitality,

_____

and safety." Their hypothesis is proving to be correct based on over 20 communities' feedback, now piloting the Baldrige principles that have been adapted in the Communities of Excellence Framework.

Just learning how to communicate in ways that everyone can understand is the first hurdle to overcome. Kruse describes the need for a common language among community members as a good place to start. He said, "Every sector and every generation have its own language to describe what they do. We don't always communicate very well. We tend to group up in hospital people or business people or school people or faith community people. As community people, how do we bring all that together? As much as we'd like to do that, we speak different languages. We think about the world differently. We have different goals in life. So, we've got to figure out how to cross that barrier of not having a common language that helps us all work together."

Community leaders in formal and informal roles of influence and authority happen upon the Communities of Excellence Framework in several ways. Some are part of a large organization in healthcare, government, manufacturing, or business charged with serving and engaging in their local community more. Some are in smaller nonprofit organizations and are changemaker individuals passionate about transforming their communities for the better. What nearly all of these people share when joining the Communities of Excellence 2026 National Learning Collaborative is that communicating with people of many different backgrounds and perspectives is challenging. Getting over this hurdle is crucial for progress. It is the basis for all other success and why a continuous improvement framework and process is a worthwhile endeavor. Convincing the diverse perspectives in communities to engage in this work is more complicated than in organizations. Making sure that volunteers who may have experience with Baldrige do not alienate those who are less familiar is very important. Once everyone is familiar with the concepts and language, the learning and practical application's benefits become more evident.

Ellen Garshick, program analyst for the Baldrige Performance Excellence Program and faculty member of Communities of Excellence 2026, has created a comparison overview of the adaptation of Baldrige for communities. It starts with the recognition that instead of a single organization, several layers of participation in communities collectively represent the "organization." A community is defined as the agreed-upon geographic region included in the work. Next is the community excellence group as a cross-sector, cross-representational roundtable of leaders and participants convenes to work together on behalf of the whole community while listening to as many perspectives as possible.

The third layer is the backbone organization, a smaller group of neutral, non-political, and non-competitive facilitators that provide the necessary support for everything from convening, developing strategy, and accomplishing goals. Sometimes backbone support comes from one anchor institution or organizational entity. In other cases, the backbone is a network of collaborating partners and contractors providing professional services for facilitation, communications, and administrative support.

Similar to an organization using the Baldrige Excellence Framework, in community development work, a community excellence group establishes the vision, mission, and values with the input from and

eventual adoption of the larger community. Community Culture and Core Values are foundational to all other categories of the Communities of Excellence Framework's success.

- Category 1 is "Community Leadership" instead of merely leadership, it describes what is essentially a shared or distributed leadership system with decision-makers, participants, observers, and influencers. The people involved are responsible for different roles at different times regardless of their formal recognized titles and positional authority within their respective entities.



- Category 2 covers strategic planning activities that parallel that of other entities.
- Category 3 and 5 describe the differences in all of the people involved. These categories of the Communities of Excellence Framework include residents and other "customers" such as business owners, commuting employees, and visitors. Instead of talking about a workforce, the title of "People Resources" acknowledges that much of the work in communities happens through the empowerment of individuals to volunteer and participate by leaders of their organizations. Community development and improvement may or may not be a paid position depending on the community's size and financial resources. Whether compensated or volunteer, dedicated resources to the effort can help collaborative groups attain their goals more effectively, efficiently, and quickly over the short- and long-term.
- Category 6 is translated as "Community Operations." It includes community offerings and programs in place of the products and services that would typically be addressed in the Baldrige Framework.
- The Communities of Excellence Framework further defines these features that the community provides and is known for in Category 4's "Measurement, Analysis and Knowledge Management" and Category 7's "Results."
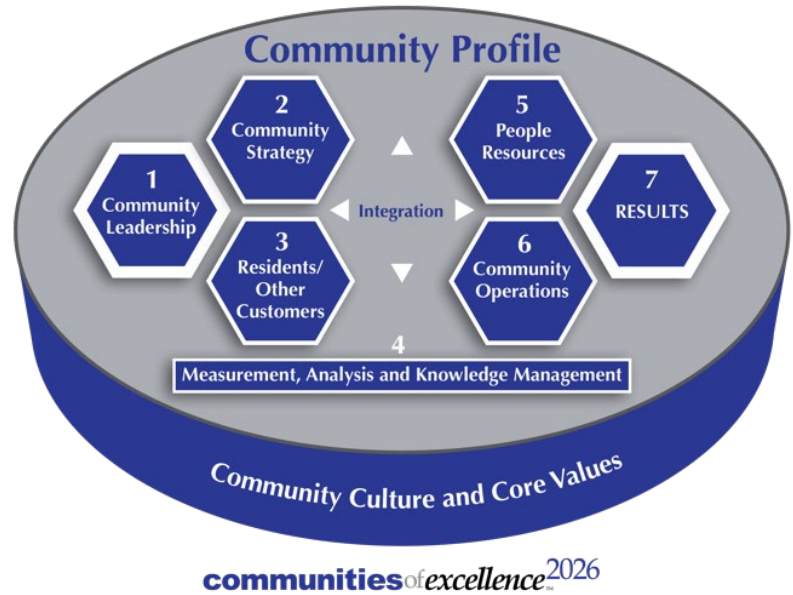
Compiling all of this information in a Community Profile helps the people involved understand the reality of their bigger picture and identify their strengths and areas of improvement as an interconnected group that identifies as a community. For further information regarding the adaptation of Baldrige to communities, please refer to Garshick's comparison listed below or contact Stephanie Norling, executive director, at snorling@communitiesofexcellence2026.org.

_____

## A Brief Crosswalk: Communities of Excellence Framework and Baldrige Excellence Framework

| Baldrige Excellence Framework | Communities of Excellence Framework | Notes | A Few Implications |
|---|---|---|---|
| Organization | No direct parallel. In the COE Framework: | | |
| | Community | The geographic region covered by the Community Profile (P.1a). Its key characteristics and strategic situation are the basis for the community excellence group's work. | The community defines itself. It can range from a discrete town, city, or county to a group of towns, cities, or counties, or a combination. |
| | Community excellence group | The cross-sector, cross-representational group convened to improve the community (P.1b). The community may use another name for this group. | Formation of this group is not as clear-cut as establishing an organization. Its makeup, leadership, and sustainability are key issues for communities. |
| | Backbone organization | One or more organizations serving as neutral facilitators for the community excellence group. | It usually provides a structured environment to convene, develop strategy, and accomplish goals. Not all community excellence groups will have one. |
| Vision, mission, values | Vision, mission, values | The community excellence group establishes these to guide its work. | In some cases, the community adopts them. |
| Product, health care, & educational program/service offerings | No direct parallel. In the COE Framework: | | |
| | Community offerings | Features that the community is known for and that attract residents and other customers (e.g., good health care, good business environment, natural resources, vibrant neighborhoods) | The framework asks for results for both of these as indicators of the community's improvement and excellence. |
| | Programs and services | Offered through the community excellence group's efforts in order to accomplish its strategy | |
| Customers, patients & other customers, students & other customers | Residents & other customers | People who use or receive the community's offerings. Other customers include, e.g., businesses, tourists, and people who work but do not live in the community. | Residents have two roles: (1) customers and (2) resources who contribute to the community's offerings and the community excellence group (see people and organizational resources). |
| Workforce | People resources | People and groups who accomplish the community's work and provide the community's offerings. The community excellence group draws on these people and groups to form itself and accomplish its work. | Motivating people and groups to participate, and ensuring the inclusion of all key groups, are key issues for the community excellence group. Residents have two roles: (1) customers and (2) resources (see residents and other customers). |
| Leadership system | Leadership system | The community excellence group has a system (participants, structures, and mechanisms) for leading its community improvement efforts. | Establishing and maintaining this system of shared leadership is another key issue for the community excellence group. |
| Strategy | Strategy | The community excellence group develops a strategy for community improvement based on its vision. | This not the strategy solely of the backbone organization or of any other group or organization. It is shared by all who participate in the community excellence group. |