

Key Themes Fact Sheet

A key theme is a perception or observation that recurs throughout the scorebook, across processes and results, reflecting major strengths, opportunities, or vulnerabilities.

Features of Key Themes

- comments that address high-level strengths or opportunities for improvement
- are significant in terms of the applicant's key factors
- are often common to more than one item/category (cross-cutting) or address an issue of particular significance in one item (often found in a comment that has been bolded)
- must be traceable to individual item comments
- strength key themes may address a core value of the Criteria
- summarize how well an applicant has addressed the Criteria requirements
- serve as an executive summary

What to ask in identifying key themes

For the "a" and "b" key themes, which are related to *process* items, the A-D-L-I evaluation factors are a good starting point. Asking the following questions will help identify the key themes:

- Which approaches are sound and systematic (or not)?
- What approaches are well-deployed throughout the organization (or not)?
- Are there areas of strength or opportunity related to organizational learning?
- Where is there strong linkage between and among processes? What areas are poorly aligned? In a more mature applicant, what areas exhibit or lack integration?

For the "c" and "d" key themes, which are related to *results* items, asking the following questions related to the results evaluation factors is a good starting point for determining commonality or themes:

- Are results trending consistently either up or down? If results are tracked over time, are they sustained?
- How do results compare to competitors or best-in-class organizations? Are adequate comparisons provided?
- To what extent are results segmented to reflect important customer, product and service, market, process, and action plan performance requirements identified in the Organizational Profile and in Process Items?
- Do you see any role model processes or results?

Core values also may serve as a source for strength key themes, when examples can be identified from item comments.

Are there core values for the sector reflected in the item comments (e.g., visionary leadership, management by fact)?

Customers

- Examiners – Key themes capture the shared understanding of a team of Examiners and are used to help focus the site visit
- Applicants – the Key themes may be the only section of the Feedback Report that is reviewed and used by senior leaders for acknowledging best practices and focusing improvement efforts

- **Judges** – Key themes help judges to develop an overall understanding of each applicant and to distinguish role model practices and key vulnerabilities.

Example

The applicant creates an environment for organizational and staff learning through the creation of an annual workforce development plan that serves as a key input to the Strategic Planning Process and drives the development of the organization’s annual training and education plan. Other means used to develop and maintain a learning environment include the use of the Plan, Do, Check, Act (PDCA) process and OASIS design and improvement models. The models include systematic benchmarking and identification of best practices, the development of annual Individual Development Plans (IDPs) for all staff and volunteers, and the offer of multiple educational benefits, such as Work to Learn, tuition reimbursement, and scholarships for staff and their children. In addition, the organization participates in multiple national, state, and local associations to gather and share best practices and learning.

This is a key theme because it

- *Goes beyond one area to address, item or category*
- *Describes various systematic processes that are important to the organization’s performance*
- *Is well deployed throughout the organization*
- *Is integrated (in harmony across the organization)*
- *Is linked to a Core Value – organizational and personal learning*

Non-example

Although the applicant assigns a “single point of responsibility” for modifying action plans when required, it is not clear how it supports rapid execution of new plans, especially considering its semiannual review and various approval approaches.

This is not a key theme because, although it may be important to the applicant’s agility, it articulates only one of the multiple requirements of item 2.2. The only instance that an item-level comment such as this would rise to the level of a key theme would be if this issue had been mentioned multiple times in other categories, or if, for example, a major health care issue had not been addressed as a result of this opportunity for improvement.

Key themes guidelines

Enter your key themes into one of four sections:

- a = process strengths
- b = process opportunities
- c = results strengths
- d = results opportunities

Write complete sentences that adhere to the comment guidelines, beginning with a summary (i.e. topic) sentence.

Include robust evidence that adds clarity and value for the application without parroting the application.