

Key Themes Overview & Samples

Key Themes provide a high-level overview of the applicant's strengths and opportunities for improvement and serve as an executive summary of the final Feedback Report. Key themes:

- Must be traceable to individual item comments;
- Are often common to more than one Criteria item, but may also address a single issue of particular significance (e.g., “++” or “- -” comments); and
- Are significant in relation to the applicant's key factors or Baldrige Core Values.

There are three main customers utilizing the key themes:

- **Examiners** – Key themes capture the shared understanding of the examiner team and are used to help focus the site visit.
- **Judges** – Key themes help the judges to develop an overall understanding of each applicant and to distinguish role model practices and key vulnerabilities.
- **Applicants** – The key themes are often used by the applicant's senior leaders for acknowledging best practices and focusing improvement efforts.

Structure of Key Themes

Key themes are separated into four sections, typically with 2 – 4 themes identified for each (this may vary by applicant maturity and application award level):

- Most significant **strengths** or outstanding practices in the **process** categories;
- Most significant **opportunities**, concerns, or vulnerabilities in the **process** categories;
- Most significant **strengths** in response to the **results** items; and
- Most significant **opportunities**, vulnerabilities, or gaps in response to the **results** items.

Identifying Key Themes

For the **process-related key themes**, focus on the A-D-L-I evaluation factors and ask yourself the following questions:

- Which approaches are sound and systematic (or not)?
- Which approaches are well-deployed across the organization (or not)?
- Is there systematic organizational learning (evaluation, improvement, and sharing) related to the processes (or not)?
- Are there strong linkages (integration and alignment) between and among processes (or not)?
- Are there any role model processes?

For the **results-related key themes**, focus on the Le-T-C-I evaluation factors and ask yourself the following questions:

- Are levels and trends consistently favorable or unfavorable? If results are tracked over time, are they sustained?

- Are adequate comparisons provided? How do results compare to similar or competitor organizations, or best-in-class organizations?
- 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?
- Are there any role model results?

Developing Key Themes

- Review the applicant's key factors and the **Core Values and Concepts** in the Baldrige Excellence Framework (pages 38-43) to help identify cross-cutting themes.
 - Remember, key theme comments generally should be at a higher level than item comments and should cut across multiple comment items; **however**, they should also be traceable to individual item comments.
- Review the comments for all items relevant to the key themes section you are developing, paying special attention to those suggested as key themes by your teammates. Use the questions in the "Identifying Key Themes" section above to identify any ideas, threads, or patterns that recur and/or are expanded upon in multiple items of categories.
 - For process strength themes, review all strength comments in Categories 1 – 6.
 - For process opportunity themes, review all OFI comments in Categories 1 – 6.
 - For process results themes, review all strength comments in Category 7.
 - For process opportunity themes, review all OFI comments in Category 7.
- Draft a topic sentence that summarize each of the potential key themes in each section.
 - **Sample Process Strength Key Theme Topic Sentences**
 - **Approach:**
XXX has developed systematic approaches for building and retaining an effective, engaged, and high performing workforce, including assessing and hiring to meet workforce capability and capacity needs, ensuring workplace health and security, managing performance, and providing learning and development opportunities.
 - **Deployment:**
XXX's key workforce support processes, including services and benefits, learning and development, and communication with senior leaders, are consistently deployed across all employee segments.
 - **Learning:**
XXX engages in systematic cycles of learning for its customer- and workforce-focused processes.
 - **Integration:**
XXX's core values are integrated throughout the organization's key processes, including strategic planning and performance management.
 - **Demonstration of a Baldrige Core Value:**
XXX's approaches for collecting and analyzing data to improve organizational performance, as well as ensuring the quality and availability of organizational data and information, demonstrates a commitment to the Baldrige core value of management by fact.

- **Sample Process OFI Key Theme Topic Sentences**
 - **Approach:**
XXX lacks systematic approaches for collecting actionable feedback from its workforce, customers, and key communities.
 - **Deployment:**
XXX's workforce-focused processes, including performance management, training and development, and benefit offerings, are not consistently deployed across its full-time, part-time, and contract employee segments.
 - **Learning:**
XXX does not engage in systematic cycles of evaluation to identify opportunities for improvement for multiple operational processes, including strategic and action planning, data measurement and analysis, and innovation management.
 - **Integration:**
Although XXX uses multiple approaches to listen to and learn from its customers, these data are not integrated into other key processes, such as strategic planning or continuous improvement.
- **Sample Results Strength Key Theme Topic Sentences**
 - **Levels and Trends:**
XXX demonstrates favorable levels and trends for its customer-focused results, including client-retention, customer complaints, and satisfaction and engagement.
 - **Comparisons**
Many of XXX's workforce-focused results, including capacity levels, workplace security, and workforce engagement, exceed the levels reported by its competitor organizations.
 - **Integration**
XXX reports favorable financial and marketplace performance results, including budgetary performance and market share growth, for each of its three service lines.
- **Sample Results OFI Key Theme Topic Sentences**
 - **Levels and Trends**
XXX demonstrates unfavorable levels and trends for multiple workforce-related results, including reportable safety incidents, turnover, and training and development participation.
 - **Comparative Data**
XXX lacks comparative data sources for its financial and marketplace performance results.
 - **Missing Data or Gaps**
XXX lacks results for multiple key work processes, such as action plan achievement, customer service, and supply chain management.
 - **Integration/Segmentation**
XXX does not segment its product- and process-related results by market segment.
- Include evidence from multiple Criteria items or requirements that demonstrates why the selected topic is a theme.
 - Write complete sentences that adhere to the comment guidelines.
 - Evidence should add clarity and value for the applicant without parroting the application.

Sample Key Themes

Below is a sample key theme for each of the four sections (process strengths and opportunities, results strengths and opportunities).

- **Sample Process Strength Key Theme**

XXX systematically deploys and integrates its core values throughout the organization. A member of the senior leadership team (SLT) meets with each new employee to provide education on the core values, describe their role in the organization's operations, and set expectations for employee compliance with the core values. Employees are given a card with the core values, which are also posted in multiple locations around the office. The core values are also consistently communicated to employees in daily huddles, staff meetings, and town halls. Job performance goals and outcomes for all employees, including SLT members are evaluated against the core values. During the strategic planning process, the strategic objectives are aligned with the core values in order to ensure XXX's strategy, goals, and action plans are balanced among varying and competing organizational needs. Additionally, innovation and strategic opportunities are assessed to determine if they support a core value prior to being pursued and implemented.

- **Sample Process Opportunity Key Theme**

Although XXX has begun implementing systematic approaches for its key organizational processes, these approaches are not consistently deployed among all workforce segments. In addition to its 30 full-time employees, XXX has more than 50 part-time and contract employees. However, approaches for multiple key processes—such as communication of the mission, vision, and values and performance management—are not deployed to this large section of the workforce. Systematic deployment of key organizational processes to all workforce segments may assist XXX in maintaining an engaged workforce that is qualified to carry out the organization's mission.

- **Sample Results Strength Key Theme**

XXX reports favorable levels and trends in many product-related results, including the number of clients (Figure 7.3) and the level of client-retention—both for its flagship product, Product A (Figure 7.5), and the organization overall (Figure 7.15). Additionally, the organization's results exhibit an increase in revenue for Product A (Figures 7.29 and 7.30) and Product B (Figure 7.32). These results underscore XXX's strategic advantages of being a niche market and having an expertise in healthcare collections and demonstrate progress towards its strategic objectives related to sales and overall organizational revenues.

- **Sample Results Opportunity Key Theme**

XXX lacks results for several key performance measures across the organization, including customer engagement and support of its key communities. In regards to its workforce, XXX does not have results related to satisfaction, capability and capacity, and workplace safety. The organization also lacks results for multiple measures of financial and market performance. Collecting data and monitoring trends related to key organizational measures may assist XXX in developing priorities for continuous improvement.