When Andy Koval joined what was then called the University of Vermont’s Technical Services Program (TSP) as a biomedical equipment technician in 1999, he remembers being presented with the organization’s strategic plan as part of his new employee orientation. When clinical engineer Leah Rafuse joined one year later, she too received the strategic plan at orientation and thereafter heard periodic updates at staff meetings. “But we had no input into the goal-setting process,” she recalls, and the plan had little impact on their day-to-day jobs.

Today, TSP’s strategic planning process has been transformed. Both Koval and Rafuse are now an integral part of the process, along with nearly half of the TSP’s 50 other employees. The strategic plan takes on daily significance to every employee as it is closely tied to the ongoing employee evaluation process. And, most importantly, nearly every aspect of TSP’s operations has been improved through the ideas generated in the planning process.

What led to this transformation? In 2002, Michael Lane, TSP’s associate director, attended a program about the Baldrige quality program put on by the Vermont Council for Quality and began considering it as a framework to manage their organization. One year later, TSP adopted the performance improvement and innovation framework known as the Baldrige Performance Excellence Program within its strategic planning process. Today, the department uses that process to craft a thorough and actionable strategic plan that is linked directly to the facility’s vision, its customers, its core competencies, and the key factors that affect their business.

**Challenge**

TSP began using a formal strategic planning process in 1996. Seven members of the leadership team and five front-line staffers initially participated in the process. “The process of implementing the strategic plan that we used in 1996 was not well-defined,” says Lane. “We went on a strategic planning retreat that primarily featured brainstorming. We sat in a room and came up with ideas and a direction for the organization.”

While many useful ideas were generated, implementing those ideas proved more difficult. “We came out of that meeting with some big goals,” says Lane. They ranged from improving the employee orientation process to improving the department’s work processes. “That made the tracking process difficult. We had no action planning process, but rather a very long list of ’to do’ items.”

“The process of implementing those ideas had many starts and stops,” says Lane. “Because no endpoints were defined, we never really knew when we were done.” Those ambitious goals combined with poorly defined action plans became an ongoing source of frustration for the management team.

In 2002, Lane attended the Baldrige program at the Vermont Council on Quality and began considering that framework as a way to manage the TSP organization. The Baldrige Criteria for
Performance Excellence (PE) are simply a set of questions focusing on critical aspects of management that contribute to performance excellence. The PE Framework is a non-prescriptive, integrated approach to managing the seven key areas of any organization: leadership, strategic planning, customer focus, knowledge management, workforce focus, process management, and results.

“I liked the Baldrige Performance Excellence framework. The framework is nonprescriptive, so it encourages innovative solutions. In addition, the PE framework focuses on results. How organizations define and achieve those results will be based on the unique characteristics of the organization,” says Lane.

The TSP’s director, J. Tobey Clark, agrees that their strategic planning process needed an overhaul. “Previously, our process didn’t have a structured framework. When we decided to revamp it, we applied all pieces of the Baldrige PE program.”

**Solution**

As a first step, Lane used a Baldrige survey assessment tool to ask TSP staff members how well their organization was doing relative to each Baldrige criteria item, and what specific areas needed improvement. “Frequent surveys encourage a culture of individuals asking, ‘Why do we do it this way and how can it be better?’” Lane says. “Questioning is critical to building a culture of innovation. We want an organizational focus on how to make every aspect of TSP better. Asking ‘why’ all the time is a foundational element of success.”

Next, they established six PE teams, with each team responsible for one of the Baldrige PE criteria. Today, 23 staff members—nearly half of the TSP staff—participate in the PE teams. Teams are balanced with members of the leadership team and a cross section of front-line staff.

Formal training in the Baldrige methodology has also been pursued. First the leadership team and then the entire PE team went to introductory training called “Raising the Bar.” Then, PE team members were trained as “Category Champions,” and four senior staff members were trained to the “Examiner” level.

A strategic planning retreat is held each year in October with the department-wide strategic planning team onsite at the University of Vermont campus. Each PE team works to prepare for the retreat by completing a strategic planning workbook. The workbook includes reflective elements—such as a review of the prior year and an analysis of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats—and visionary items, to encourage teams to look ahead and be innovative. Each team makes a presentation at the retreat, and brainstorming sessions generate ideas for future initiatives focused on the seven Baldrige areas.

Follow-up efforts focus on honing these brainstormed lists into a more manageable list of concrete projects to be pursued, with definitions of what will be produced at the end of the team’s work. For example, 33 action items were identified as worth pursuing during the fall 2010 retreat. After the retreat, the leadership team held a four-hour brainstorming session to prioritize those items into “quick wins,” “priority As,” and “priority Bs,” with the goal of keeping the follow-up efforts more manageable.

“The process works well,” says Clark. “At the retreat, each SPP team does a formal presentation reviewing its past year and suggesting plans for the future. After those presentations, we work to sort through those ideas, first in a large group with all the team members, then with a smaller senior management team, who whittle through the ideas and work them into a strategic plan for the organization.”

Upon completion of the strategic plan, individual performance plans are developed to

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—Michael Lane, Technical Services Partnership
“Being involved in this team has been great. Previously, most decisions were made at a higher level. Now, more decisions are being made at the front lines. My involvement in the team has allowed me to improve my management and communication skills. Plus, it’s nice to know your input is being valued.”

—Andy Koval, Technical Services Partnership

link individual performance goals with the organizational direction. “We want each individual to set goals that are tied into the organization’s strategic goals,” says Clark. “It can be hard for individual employees to interpret how those broad organizational goals relate to them. We use the interaction with a supervisor around the employee appraisal process to bring them down to a practical level for each individual.”

In 2011, the retreat will expand to a two-day meeting for the first time. “We want to allow the teams more time to focus on action planning,” says Lane. “In the past, as we moved out of a retreat, we had a list of initiatives. But then, action planning took time as everyone had to return to their regular responsibilities. Now, Day 1 will feature brainstorming, and Day 2 will focus on developing workable action plans while team members are sitting in a room together.”

Post-retreat, teams typically meet for about two hours a month to check in and collaborate. As some staff members work more than three hours away from the university campus, they often use Cisco WebEx web conferencing for online meetings. “It allows any staff at any site to participate in meetings without having to take time to travel,” says Clark.

Andy Koval is now a front-line member of the Employee Engagement Team. This team has tackled efforts related to retaining key employees, helping new hires get training, improving the orientation process, identifying ways to find the best people to come in for interviews, and planning the TSP’s annual all-staff meeting in March.

“Having staff involved in planning the all-staff meeting has helped keep topics relevant,” he reports. “We are getting good feedback from the meetings.”

Koval heads up a subteam on the orientation process, which they’re trying to streamline. He came up with the idea of surveying new employees daily, weekly, and then at the end of the orientation process to get their feedback as they are going through the process. His team has also improved the orientation manual, which they’re now moving online, and instituted job shadowing. The group is also focusing on retaining key employees. “So far, our efforts have been successful and feedback positive,” he reports.

“Being involved in this team has been great,” he says. “Previously, most decisions were made at a higher level. Now, more decisions are being made at the front lines. My involvement in the team has allowed me to improve my management and communication skills. Plus, it’s nice to know your input is being valued.”

Clark points to the improvements in hiring as one of the key successes of the revamped strategic planning process. “We want hires who will stay on and be engaged,” he says. “Before, hiring wasn’t systematic, and hires sometimes didn’t last through orientation. We have difficult positions to fill, both in terms of their geographic location and specialized nature.” Now, through the efforts of the Employee Engagement team, a new framework and system for hiring has improved both hiring and retention. “Once that framework was established, hiring became easier. It’s less work to get and keep new employees. Less time on hiring has meant that our managers have had more time to focus on expanding the business, which has led to increased revenues.”

Leah Rafuse is now part of the High Performing Processes Team. Its focus is on improving processes across the organization. “We have come up with a process for improving processes,” she says. “We want everything to be consistent. We have established criteria for all processes. For example, all processes must be
TSP's High Performing Processes Team is working to revamp all of the group's policies and procedures and make them easily available via Sharepoint online using this image—which graphically depicts their strategic plan—as a navigational tool. Their goal is to make all documents available within three clicks.

benchmarked. We are also working on simplification: tightening up procedures, documents, and making things simple.”

As part of this effort, the group is working to make all procedures easily available via Microsoft Sharepoint online using a COMPASS image—which graphically depicts the strategic plan—as a navigational tool (COMPASS stands for Comprehensive Online Management Processes and Support Systems). The group’s goal is to make all documents available within three clicks.

“Through my involvement in this team, I’ve been trained in project management and time management,” Rafuse says. “And it is nice to know that our input is being considered. While the old process didn’t include many staff, it is great now being part of the plan development. It’s easier to go with a heading when we helped develop it.”

Results
Positive changes have been made in nearly every aspect of the TSP organization, they report, including a high-profile name change for TSP, which formerly stood for “Technical Services Program.” The word “Program” was changed to “Partnership” in 2010. That change came out of a strategic initiative to revamp their website. It was made to emphasize TSP’s ongoing partnerships with its customers.

TSP management and staff all point to increased employee engagement as one of the greatest improvements in the new, Baldrige-based strategic planning process.

Lane says that the focus on results gained by using the Baldrige PE criteria has meant success for their organization. “This new process forces us to work hard to hone in on the final product. Goals are more specific and well-defined,” he says.

He believes that adopting this framework has taken the entire TSP organization on a journey to excellence. Employee engagement is up, customer relationships have improved, and revenues have increased. “The processes we put in place have allowed us to capitalize on new opportunities,” he says.

“The time this process takes is well worth the investment,” says Clark, who credits Lane for transforming their strategic planning activity. “He has enriched our organization by initiating and sustaining the Baldrige framework used to develop our strategic plan.”

For More Information
To learn more about the Baldrige Criteria for Performance Excellence, see the following resources:

- [www.nist.gov/baldrige/publications/criteria.cfm](http://www.nist.gov/baldrige/publications/criteria.cfm)
- [www.baldrige.com/](http://www.baldrige.com/)