

# Talking the Walk:

## An Open Letter to BEST Applicants



For the past several years I've been honored to serve as a reviewer for ATD's BEST awards. It's a privilege to read about the exciting work talent development organizations are doing from all over the world. It is work, but it's fun work. And because there are multiple reviewers and a tightly managed process, I never have to worry that an error in interpretation or judgment on my part will be a problem. It really is a pleasure—except for one thing: I hate it when submissions don't talk the walk.

When studying an entry I know in my gut that something truly amazing happened; but the write up doesn't adequately describe it. I can't judge the entry on what I'm almost certain is true. I must rate the submission on what it actually reports. I worry that learning organizations are not being fully recognized because they are not doing the best job they can of explaining their accomplishments, they are not talking the walk. Here are things that may prevent great organizations from getting the credit they deserve.

### The One Trick Pony

Sometimes an organization has just completed an amazing, mind-boggling, million-dollar-saving intervention. The kind of thing that is worthy of a best practices seminar. I sit in awe of those who pulled it off. But as I continue to read the entry, that same amazing story is re-told multiple times as the example for nearly every question the application asks. This approach misses an important reality: One big thing or one really great thing doesn't replace everything. Telling more of the story of that incredible intervention doesn't reveal the entirety of what the learning organization is and what it is doing. And the BEST awards are all about the entire organization, not just one thing the organization is doing, no matter how great that thing is.

### Missing or Weak Measurement

The majority of the things that BEST awards asks us to talk about includes links to the business issue or business need. And usually, very explicitly, the question is posed: "How do you know you made a difference?" That means measurement.

Sometimes the responses fail entirely to answer the question of impact. More often, the answers are just a little weaker than I suspect they should be. Since I don't want this to be a review of levels of evaluation (there are plenty of people who know more about that than I do), I'll just give my view of what constitutes weaker and stronger measures on a scale from 1 to 7, with 1 as very weak and 7 as very strong.

1. **The smiles test. Everybody said they liked it, and it was good.**
2. **Uptake. Enrollment went up. Everybody wants to attend.**

3. **Customer happiness.** The people who asked for the intervention say they are satisfied with it. Sometimes this includes “celebrity testimonials” from important people.
4. **Satisfaction survey results.** We did the training because scores were low. Scores got better.
5. **Reported changes in behavior.** Attendees self-report and/or (even better) their customers or their bosses report they are doing the stuff they were taught.
6. **Talent development department invented or contracted measures.** We agreed with the customer to track one or more indicators of improved performance and business results. It’s not something we usually track; but it does measure what we’re trying to achieve.
7. **Existing business measures.** We achieved the organizational outcome and we can prove it. These measures are always better if they are dollarized.

The stronger the measure, the stronger the entry.

## Misunderstanding Efficiency

The BEST entry asks about the efficiency of the learning organization. It asks: “Are you getting better at what you do?” Too often, the answers to those questions refer to the results of the intervention and how happy people are with those results. Results may be the most important aspect of the intervention, but they measure effectiveness, not efficiency. Efficiency measures how you get things done. Did you do it faster than before? Cheaper? Sooner? As it does for any business, efficiency shows if the learning function is getting more productive.

I’ve seen responses like: “Last year we trained 800 people and this year we trained 1,000.” Showing that you did more only shows that you did more. If you went from 800 to 1,000 trained, but with three times the resources, then you probably got less efficient. Showing that you did more with the same resources, or did the same amount with fewer resources, shows improved efficiency.

Comparison to benchmarks or other accepted standards can show that you are efficient, but it is a weaker measure. “Our development cost for this type of program is \$450, while the reported national average is \$600.” That’s great, but if you did it last year for \$435, should you be feeling efficient? The case is stronger if you can show improvement over past performance. Solid measures of efficiency are improvements in “cost-pers” such as cost per hour delivered, cost per person trained, cost per finished unit of instruction, etc.

Another great area to review is “reductions” like cycle time for a process, or errors and rework. An increase in numbers of projects managed per staff person is another place to look. Improvements in quality are usually NOT measures of efficiency, since they have to do with the output or product—what you get done.

## **The Ambience of an Analytical Approach**

There are several areas where the BEST application seeks evidence of the rigor that talent development organizations apply to the way they do business. The questions ask about how choices get made, how customers are served, basically, how things get done. The subtlety here is that, as a reviewer, I can't take anything for granted. There are times when I am almost certain that the organization I'm reading about has a thorough and well-grounded ISD process, but they don't say so. I think that some of these excellent organizations assume that we know they are using analysis, ADDIE, or ISD principles of some other ilk. It's second nature to them, standard operating procedure, and it goes without saying. But in the case of a BEST entry, it doesn't go without saying.

## **Novelty Junkies**

It's pretty easy for any of us in talent development to be most excited by the newest intervention we're managing. There are lots of reasons. It may utilize the newest technology or learning approach. It may be the culmination of several efforts over many years. And, well, it's the newest thing we are doing. The problem is often that the newest things we are doing aren't done yet. And that means that we don't yet know the full results. Sometimes we have early data, and that's great. But often, all we have are positive initial reactions from our customers and great expectations about the benefits to come. That means that if we are asked to evaluate the impact of the intervention, we simply cannot. And that means that the story is weaker because it doesn't have an ending.

## **What's in Place Versus What's in Process**

Somewhat related to the above is the situation in which a learning organization is in the middle of implementing some new process. It could be a new education planning process, a new analysis approach, a new LMS/LCMS, or a new evaluation system. When asked to discuss how things are done, the submission instead talks about how things will soon be done. It's difficult to give full credit for something that has not happened yet. In the meantime, the entry contains limited information about what is being done now, even though what is being done now is probably pretty darn good if the organization is evolving to a new and better approach.

## **So, What Is A Non-Learning Solution?**

OK, I'm ready to admit that this will probably always be a tough area. The whole point of everything we do is to improve performance. Most of the time, we can't get there without somebody learning something! There's a philosophical argument to be made that everything we do is a learning intervention. But when the BEST reviewers (at least this one) look at information that is supposed to be about

non-learning solutions, we're a lot more practical than that. We're looking for those stories where analysis and other work by the learning group led to process changes, fixes to deficiencies in the environment, maybe the creation of new tools or new jobs. Though closer to the traditional training world, coaching and mentoring programs might also be good examples. But workshops, brownbags, new curricula, train-the-trainer programs, and online modules are traditional learning interventions.

## Innovative for the Profession... Or Bleeding Edge for You?

There's a part of the BEST entry form that asks for stories about leading edge practices. This can be tricky if you're not paying attention, because the question is asking about stuff that is innovative for the talent development profession, not just for your organization. I can think of several times in my career as a CLO when what I was doing was not really new to the profession at all. But for the organization I was serving, it was incredibly risky and way out on the bleeding edge. It sure feels innovative when you are trying to manage through it; but it isn't leading edge for our profession.

It's hard, even for the very best among us, to lead a new innovation. If you think about it though, innovation doesn't often happen that way anyway. You'll more likely find innovation in a smaller part of what you're doing. As an example, using retired executives as coaches for high potential managers may not be leading edge, but using retired execs from your competitors certainly could be.

None of this is intended to suggest that entries for the BEST awards need to be longer—just different. From what I've seen in the entries over these past few years, it doesn't take more words, just a different point of view to really tell the story of your greatness.

I know that, when compared to the important work your learning function is doing every day, writing up an award entry probably isn't a big priority. But there are three huge benefits to taking great care when applying for the BEST award.

**First**, completing the entry is a great introspective act that helps you and others to look holistically, critically, and appreciatively at your work.

**Second**, there are hundreds of other training groups out there who stand to benefit from learning about what you have accomplished. If you don't capture it accurately, if you don't talk the walk, they never will.

**And third**, hey—you deserve to win.

**All the BEST,**  
**ATD BEST Award Reviewer**