

# What is a Key Theme?

## Definition

A key theme is a perception or observation that recurs throughout the scorebook, and across processes and results, reflecting major strengths, opportunities, or vulnerabilities. [In BOSS, major strengths and opportunities for improvement (OFIs) at the item level are indicated with ++ or -- signs.]

## Features

Key themes

- are comments addressing 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 (crosscutting) or address an issue of particular significance in one item (often found in a bolded comment)
- must be traceable to comments found in the Consensus Review (CR) Worksheets
- may be supported by Baldrige core value, if the key theme describes a strength
- summarize how well an applicant has addressed the Criteria questions
- serve as an executive summary

## How to Identify Key Themes

For the "a" and "b" key themes, which are related to process items, the evaluation factors—approach, deployment, learning, and integration (ADLI)—are a good starting point. The following questions will help identify the key themes:

- Which approaches are sound and systematic (or not)?
- What approaches are well deployed as appropriate 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?
- Do you see any role-model processes?

For the "c" and "d" key themes, which are related to results items, the following questions related to the results evaluation factors—levels, trends, comparisons, and integration (LeTCl)—are a good starting point for determining commonality or themes.

- Are results trending consistently either up or down? If results are tracked over time, are good or excellent performance levels sustained?
- How do results compare to those of competitors or other organizations with similar offerings? 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 results?

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

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

### Correct Key Theme

The applicant's well-executed approach to organizational learning supports its cultural focus on identifying problems, innovating solutions, and improving performance results. Approaches that are important to organizational success are continuously improved. For example, improvements resulting from the annual evaluation of the SPP include the revision of planning horizons, the introduction of the Strategic Alignment Document, and the formation of the MIG. Other examples are the Product and Service Offering Process, the VOC Process, workforce engagement and communication processes, and approaches used to improve work processes.

*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 and linked to the organization's key factors*
- *is integrated (in harmony across the organization)*

### Incorrect Key Theme

It is not clear how the applicant supports rapid execution of new action plans after they are identified, assigned to a manager, and approved. This may limit the applicant in addressing its need to respond quickly to a changing funding and regulatory environment.

*This is not a key theme because, although it may be important to the applicant's agility, it articulates only one of the multiple questions of item 2.2. The only instance that an item-level comment might rise to the level of a key theme would be if the examiner team agrees that the OFI is a fatal flaw for the organization, driving the score in an area of key strategic importance for the organization; in such a case, the OFI would be bolded in the item [as indicated by double minus signs (--) in BOSS] to signal its significance for the applicant.*

### Key Themes Worksheet Guidelines

- Write complete sentences that adhere to the Comment Guidelines, beginning with a summary (i.e., topic) sentence that provides the "nugget" of feedback.
- Include a few examples as evidence to add clarity and value for the applicant, without parroting the application. Avoid telling the applicant what it already knows (e.g., data from figures and steps included in processes).
- Do not anchor b and d key themes (opportunities for improvement) in a Baldrige core value, as this may imply an evaluation against the core value. Instead, anchor these key themes in the Criteria questions and scoring guidelines.

### Criteria for Writing Excellent Key Themes

- Must conform to the Comment Guidelines, including the NER component
- Must be simple and impactful
- Should be strategic in nature, either addressing cross-cutting issues, critical KFs, or ADLI/LeTCI themes
- No Baldrige-ese

- Should reflect and maybe even incorporate appropriate scoring language. For OFIs, that would mean scoring language at the next higher scoring range
- Must be traceable to comments in the CR Worksheets
- Don't conflict with each other or with comments in the worksheets
- Should somehow indicate what must be done to remain competitive and to ensure long-term sustainability