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Council for Quality makes a comeback

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The Minnesota Council for Quality is turning around, a fortuitous rebound that could soon guarantee its survival. In its early 1990s heyday, the council sent a message to the world that Minnesota was a stronghold for best corporate practices.

It was the first state quality council; today, there are 45.

Its efforts helped Minnesota produce more winners of the coveted **Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award** than almost any other state. With much fanfare, it patterned its own awards program after the national one.

But early last year, things looked bleak for the 16-year-old council. “We were going out of business,” chairman **Craig Robinson** says.

The turning point came when 34-year-old quality consultant **Brian Lassiter** came on board — initially at no salary — as president. Lassiter, who once worked for **The St. Paul Cos.**, is well wired in the “quality network.”

He pumped new vigor into the council. Big corporate members returned. Overall membership has climbed back, to 86 from a low of 17 a year ago.

This spring, the council is launching an online “clearinghouse” to point members to the resources that enhance quality programs. This fall, it will unveil another new service for members, vendor referrals — a yellow pages of quality improvement consultants.

The council, which added governments, nonprofits and schools to its awards program in the 1990s, actually named a church — **Bethel Lutheran** in Rochester — as a winner this year. Lassiter believes Bethel Lutheran is the first church in the country to have participated in the full Baldrige-based assessment process.

In January, the council acquired the **Deming Forum**, a professional group named after the late quality guru **W. Edwards Deming**. Lassiter is shaping alliances with schools, professional associations and outstate groups.

The council was born as part of the **Minnesota Department of Trade and Economic Development**. Its annual budget was close to \$500,000 in the early 1990s. Five years ago, it lost what remained of its state funding. Today, the budget is about \$110,000, but it's rising.

In hindsight, says Lassiter, the loss of state funding “might have been the best thing for our organization, because it forced us to behave more like a business.” Robinson agrees. “We had to get off taking money from the government,” he says.

The council closed its office in Bloomington. Instead, Lassiter runs the organization from his home in Minneapolis. He communicates by e-mail with part-time staffers in Plymouth and Faribault and 90 volunteers scattered across the state.

Lassiter and Robinson, president of **Robinson Capital Management** in Edina, have been trying to get ahead of the changes sweeping across the world of quality improvement. New systems of measuring and improving performance are complementing and enriching efforts that use Baldrige criteria. **Jim Buckman**, who led the council from 1989 to 1993, says more than 100 Minnesota companies are now implementing Six Sigma, the most significant of the new systems.

Minnesota retains a special status on the quality front.

- The Baldrige award program is named after a Reagan administration Commerce Department secretary who died in a rodeo accident. In Minnesota, six companies — **Zytec**, **IBM-Rochester**, **BI**, **3M's** dental products unit, **Cargill's Sunny Fresh Foods** unit and **Custom Research** — have won Baldriges.
- The Twin Cities chapter of the **American Society for Quality** is one of its largest and most active.
- **Joseph Juran**, a widely known East Coast quality expert who grew up here, gave the **University of Minnesota** \$1 million to establish the **Juran Center for Leadership in Quality**. Buckman is a co-director and Juran, now 98 years old, is writing his memoirs.

In this kind of setting, it just wouldn't seem right not to have the quality council around.

Robinson heaps credit for its rebirth on Lassiter. “The turnaround came when Brian Lassiter became president,” he declares.

Lassiter and Robinson first began talking about the job early last year during a meeting at a downtown Minneapolis coffeehouse. Lassiter said he didn't want the council to go away and offered to go to work for it.

Six months later, the council cobbled together enough money to put him on salary. But Robinson says the council is only about a third of the way back to where it wants to be. The council, he says, won't be in the safety zone until Lassiter is making more than his “still very nominal salary.” That hasn't happened yet, but it could soon.