

# *Best Practices Bake-Off*

*By Lorne R. Armstrong*

**B**est Practices is a concept that has considerable undeserved cachet. There is an embarrassment of unexamined assumptions embedded in the myths surrounding best practices.

There is no clear, common understanding of what is meant by “best practices”. Does it refer to the practices of the “best” companies; or to practices of some of the best known companies, or the best known publicly traded companies? Or is it the most common practices of a selected set of some of the best known... you get the point.

And who says those practices are the “best”? Or even that they are the specific practices that have led to that companies (presumed) success?

America’s Test Kitchen – a popular television cooking show – tests kitchen equipment and recipes. The point here is that they *test* them – they have a panel of people who test them. They don’t publish the “best” recipes without having their panel test them at home and then rate them for the results they produce. Often, the “best” kitchen equipment does not come from the best manufacturer (biggest market cap) or the best known brand. And, it’s seldom the most expensive.

The best practice for scrambling eggs is determined by people scrambling eggs in different ways and tasting the results. The best chocolate cake practice is determined in a taste-test bake-off.

Nobody bets millions on the best way to scramble eggs and those practices are tested! Organizations bet tens and hundreds of millions on best practices all the time without any testing! With scant evidence of the effectiveness of the practices – without a bake-off that determines that some particular practice is best for them.

And of course, there’s the rub. How would you know if some practice – some way of doing things – is best for your organization? Let’s bring just a dash of thoughtfulness to this issue before running off half-baked to the next conference or workshop purporting to tell you about the best practices in some particular area.

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## AN EFFECTIVE DISTRACTION

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Best Practices are an effective distraction from the real source of power in creating competitive advantage. That's why smart organizations are so willing to share them! They distract others from noticing what really makes the difference. Distraction – the best magicians have mastered the art. They tell you what to keep your eye on to keep you from noticing what they are really doing.

Think about what it would take for a practice to be “best” for you and your organization. First, it would have to integrate with other practices. Even the most simplistic thinkers would be hard pressed to suggest that there is any one practice in an organization that has no relation to other practices: that the part of the organization employing that practice has no effect on the rest of the organization and the rest of the organization has not effect on that part. Impossible! Separate and disconnected is the primary source of organizational difficulty; not a solution.

The organization that develops a particular practice does it in some particular circumstances, at some particular time, to address an issue that those people, at that time, saw needed to be addressed and who determined an effective way for them to address it given their unique strengths, background and relationships with each other.

Well of course that practice ought to work for you and your organization! You're just like them! Or more insidiously as the thinking goes, if we act like them in this particular area we can become as successful as them.

Balderdash! Your thinking; your orientation is a more fundamental source of power for improving organizational performance than your practices ever will be.

Comparing practices will reveal the mechanics of the activities. It gets more interesting however when you discover the thinking – the orientation from which the practices arose. From this level you can begin to understand how those practices “make sense” and begin to assess their suitability for your organization. Unless your orientation to the area matches those who make best use of the practice, attempting to implement the practice won't produce the expected results. It gets even more interesting when you consider how – or whether – the set of practices are coherently integrated within the organization.

I visited Japan at the end of 1980 when Quality Circles were all the rage. A presentation by the management team at Toshiba's Fukaya Works showed the evolution of their employee involvement practices from the early 1940s to where they anticipated it would go in the mid 1990s. They openly wondered why we cared at all about Quality Circles; they had evolved beyond that practice two years before our conversation.

Ask yourself what is required for your organization to be successful at this point in time; facing your challenges with your people. Listen deeply for something fundamental that is missing and available – don't just make it up! Then develop practices that fit what is called for now and evolve them as your organization develops and as circumstances change.

COOKING UP BEST PRACTICES – FOR YOUR ORGANIZATION

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(An untested recipe but that shouldn't matter)

Gently mix several “good eggs” until integrated. Do not separate. Be careful; we just want them folded together, not beaten.

Place over high heat and stir gently with a significant accomplishment required by a specific deadline.

Add the spice of fresh thinking; whip up inspiration, listen for practical solutions bubbling up.

Reduce over the high heat of reality.

Serve developmentally.