



Tax Collector Sets Example For Efficiency

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Hillsborough Tax Collector Doug Belden and his staff deserve commendation for winning a statewide award for exceptional efficiency, productivity and customer service.

Belden took a chance even entering the competition. How many local officials would want to undergo an evaluation that inspects all phases of operations, establishes benchmark goals and judges workers' effectiveness?

Yet Belden entered the Governor's Sterling Award competition three straight years, using its findings to drive improvements and innovations.

The Sterling Award was initiated by former Gov. Lawton Chiles and is modeled after the Malcolm Baldrige Award, a national program that recognizes public and private operations for outstanding performance.

The awards program has recognized certain phases of Belden's office in past years. But this year the office received its top honor, becoming the first tax collector's office in the state to win a Sterling Award. It's also the first time a Hillsborough public agency has won a Sterling.

Among the numbers Sterling evaluators cited:

- Surveys found customer satisfaction is 99 percent (Belden's team has developed a problem-tracking system to deal with that 1 percent.)
- Employee satisfaction was rated at 89 percent and subsequently improved when the office held team-building and communication exercises at the departments where employee satisfaction was lowest.
- Waits at branch offices have gone from more than hour when Belden took office in 1998 to less than 15 minutes.
- Some 97 percent of property tax payments are processed the same day they are received in the mail.

Belden credits his office's performance to workers who are empowered to solve problems. Employees are recognized for ideas that save money or improve efficiency.

But the tax collector himself deserves considerable credit for emphasizing efficiency and

accountability.

"We have scorecards in every department," he says. "Finances, customer satisfaction ... we measure everything and are always reviewing our performance and how we can improve it."

All local officials should take note. Such attention to detail - and taxpayers' dollars - is the surest way to gain the public's confidence.

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