BETTER BUSINESS BUREAU
TORCH AWARDS FOR ETHICS

2026

BBB OF CENTRAL ILLINOIS

A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO A STRONGER SUBMISSION

APPLICATION TIP SHEET

The BBB Torch Awards for Ethics celebrate businesses and nonprofit organizations that demonstrate an exceptional commitment to ethics and integrity. This guide will help applicants organize clear, specific, and evidence-based responses around the four Torch Award principles: **Character, Culture, Customers, and Community**.

ELIGIBILITY

Confirm before you begin

The most recently published local criteria state that an eligible organization must have been in business for at least **three years**, maintain its headquarters within the BBB of Central Illinois service area, and remain in good standing with BBB throughout the process.

For businesses, good standing requires a BBB rating of **B or higher** and no unresolved complaints. Past business-category winners may reapply if they did not win in the immediately preceding year; past nonprofit-category winners are not currently eligible to reapply.

ENTRY SUBMISSION

Make every response count

Complete every required section and address each prompt directly. Use concise examples, measurable outcomes, and supporting material when the application allows it, including policies, employee communications, customer stories, reviews, training materials, or photographs.

Submit through the official online application process and follow the file-type, file-size, and page-limit instructions displayed in the 2026 portal.

TIP Draft each response in a separate document, label every prompt clearly, and ask a colleague who was not involved in writing it to confirm that the answer is easy to follow. **Strong applications are honest about challenges and specific about how ethical values guide decisions.**

PREPARE BEFORE OPENING THE PORTAL

GENERAL INFORMATION

Gather the organization's legal and public-facing names; headquarters address; CEO, president, owner, or executive director contact information; primary applicant contact information; employee count; year established; website; business or nonprofit description; and the names of the individuals who helped prepare the submission.

When calculating employee count, use the method requested by the application portal. If no method is specified, keep full-time, part-time, seasonal, and contractor counts clearly separated.

LEADERSHIP SETS THE TONE

CRITERIA 1: CHARACTER

Explain how the CEO, president, owner, or executive director acts intentionally and communicates with leaders, employees, customers, and stakeholders in ways that are consistent with the organization's stated values.

1. **Leadership feedback**
   How does the leader seek candid feedback and use it for personal improvement?

2. **Employee empowerment**
   How are employees prepared and authorized to uphold ethical business practices when decisions are difficult?

3. **Tools and training**
   Which activities, expectations, policies, or training make character and ethics part of normal operations?

Show, do not only tell: include one example of a difficult decision in which values guided the outcome, then explain what happened and what the organization learned.

TRUST THROUGH PURPOSE AND PARTICIPATION

CRITERIA 2: CULTURE

Describe how the organization creates clarity of purpose, invites employee participation, and supports individual growth.

1. **Shared mission**
   How are employees united around the mission, vision, and values in day-to-day work?

2. **Employee voice**
   How do employees help shape expectations, decisions, and workplace culture?

3. **Commitment to people**
   Which practices demonstrate leadership's commitment to individual employees and their development?

RELATIONSHIPS BUILT ON TRUST

CRITERIA 3: CUSTOMERS

Give examples of practices that strengthen customer relationships and show how transparency, accountability, and service recovery are built into the customer experience.

1. **Proactive problem-solving**
   How are employees empowered to identify and address customer concerns before they escalate?

2. **Transparency**
   How does the organization maintain clarity in pricing, policies, communication, or service delivery?

3. **Honesty under pressure**
   When has straightforward communication produced a positive outcome during a challenging interaction?

Helpful evidence: a resolved complaint, service-recovery example, communication template, customer feedback trend, or documented improvement made in response to customer input.

VALUES EXPRESSED THROUGH SERVICE

CRITERIA 4: COMMUNITY

Describe programs, contributions, and activities that return value to the community and align with the organization's purpose.

1. **Participation**
   How does the organization take part in community programs, partnerships, or events?

2. **Employee engagement**
   How are employees encouraged and recognized for volunteering or civic participation?

3. **Aligned contributions**
   How do financial or in-kind contributions reflect organizational values and local priorities?

LEADERSHIP LETTER

Make it personal and specific

Prepare a concise letter from the CEO, president, owner, or executive director explaining why the organization merits consideration, what ethical leadership means in practice, and what receiving a 2026 Torch Award would mean to employees, customers, and the community.

EVIDENCE IDEA

Highlight sustained partnerships, volunteer participation, donated services, sponsorships, or community outcomes—not only one-time contributions.

SELECT PEOPLE WHO CAN CONFIRM THE IMPACT

REFERENCES

Choose references who can verify both the relationship and the organization's positive impact. Strong references may include customers, vendors, community partners, professional advisers, or other stakeholders identified by the application. Provide complete contact information and give each reference enough context and time to write a specific letter.

A+ A useful reference letter explains how the writer knows the organization, gives a concrete example of ethical conduct, and describes the resulting impact.

ONE LAST QUALITY CHECK

FINAL REVIEW CHECKLIST

- ☐ Every required prompt is answered directly.
- ☐ Claims are supported by evidence or outcomes.
- ☐ Uploaded files are clearly labeled and readable.
- ☐ Links work wherever links are permitted.
- ☐ Examples are specific, relevant, and recent.
- ☐ Names, dates, and figures are consistent.
- ☐ Confidential or sensitive information is removed.
- ☐ A second reviewer checked clarity and completeness.

2026 APPLICATION INFORMATION

START WITH THE OFFICIAL APPLICATION PAGE

Use the BBB of Central Illinois website to access the current 2026 Torch Awards application, deadlines, category details, and submission instructions. Because timelines and portal requirements may change, the live application page is the final authority.

WEBSITE
2026.bbbtorchforethics.com/apply-now

CONTACT
Andrew Smith
309-271-1450
bbbacc3@hoibbb.org

QUESTIONS?

Contact Andrew Smith at bbbacc3@hoibbb.org or 309-271-1450 before the published deadline. Identify your organization, application category, and the section that prompted the question.

SOURCE NOTE

Local eligibility language and contact information were adapted from BBB of Central Illinois's official website and its most recently published Torch Awards event page, accessed July 2026.