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Communication In Six Sigma

By Peter Peterka

Deploying Six Sigma means entering a period of significant change in your organization.

Productivity and morale almost always suffers in times of great change. The requirements of change and adaptation and the very human fear of the unknown add to stresses of the work environment. In these times, communication becomes more important than ever.

Communication throughout a Six Sigma project is very important because the power and scope of Six Sigma demands a significant commitment from everyone in the organization. Six Sigma successes require clear and open communication at all levels to transcend departmental barriers that would otherwise cause confusion. In addition, any change in an organization will meet some resistance, either intentional or just because of inertia. When management can effectively communicate that it is behind that change and can communicate the positive aspects of the change, resistance can be countered and overcome.

Company leadership must be willing to give Six Sigma teams all of the tools and information necessary to apply Six Sigma concepts to their day-to-day activities. It is crucial in Six Sigma projects to clarify the rationale, expectations, goals, and sequence of steps in the process. Six Sigma teams with clear, written goals accomplish far more in a shorter period of time than teams without them could ever imagine. This is true everywhere and under all circumstances. Documentation of the Six Sigma process is the opportunity to resolve any misunderstandings of the deployment. A schedule is developed that outlines the strategy to take the process from its current state to one that is within statistical control and in line with the company's Six Sigma goals. Roles need to be clearly defined in how individuals contribute to the schedule and strategy. Employees assess how they can contribute to the organization through the information they receive. A team's quality goals should be set to tie in with the overall company quality improvement goals. This happens only when the team has the knowledge they need.

Lack of clarity in communicating business information is probably more responsible for frustration and underachievement than any other single factor. It is unfortunately way too easy to not realize that communication is falling short of your organization's needs. Often senior managers sincerely believe they are adequately communicating with employees. However, managers can easily underestimate the

number of issues on which employees need information and how much information they need.

How do you know what is important to employees and what to tell them? You need to put yourself in the position of the employees. If you were that person, what would be important for you to know to do your job? What would you be worried about in the current situation? What information would help you deal with change? How would you want to be told? You can't answer those questions yourself. You need input from the very people you are trying to understand. Communication is a two-way street—listening as well as talking. Asking a few individuals what is being said, what people are worrying and wondering about.

Also be aware that the way a person receives news can dramatically affect how he or she feels about it, so you need to choose the medium very carefully. E-mail can be perceived as cold and unfeeling, although it is useful for routine updates that don't have emotional overtones. Many messages are better delivered in person, either to individuals or to the team as a whole.

Communication skills take practice. Always be sure the message remains honest, clear and compassionate. Have integrity and build trust. Don't say what you don't mean. Don't promise anything that you cannot or will not fulfill. Above all, follow through on your commitments and promises. Nothing turns employees off more than feeling betrayed. Sincere, caring, and constant communication will form the basis for building employee engagement throughout Six Sigma deployment.

Peter Peterka is a Master Six Sigma Black Belt for Six Sigma us and has implemented Six Sigma in a variety of organizations. For additional information for Six Sigma Training and Six Sigma Consulting please contact Peter Peterka at

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Countering The False Notion That Six Sigma Is Elitist

By Peter Peterka

Too often, when people think of Six Sigma and black belts they see them as having an elitist connotation. The opinion that Six Sigma is elitist or that black belts are elitist, however, are false. In its purest form Six Sigma is a "way of life" for an organization serious about process improvement. It just happens to have certain characteristics that people like to throw stones at. That some people have come to believe this false notion is because they have misinterpreted the nature of Six Sigma and not seen the complete picture.

There is an air of mysteriousness that surrounds what Six Sigma black belts do. People experience projects where black belts are left alone to crunch numbers and work on long projects in isolated offices far from the factory floor. They wonder what exactly happens behind the scenes and not knowing, become apprehensive. This is especially true when they know the outcomes will affect them. If employees have not received any training in Six Sigma, their ignorance about the processes will lead them to mistrust and even fear the Six Sigma project and the experts guiding the project.

Communication In Six Sigma

Other people have developed resentment toward Six Sigma consultants themselves. Certainly, there are some individual consultants who are arrogant, uncooperative, and insensitive to others. That, though, reflects on that individual and does not represent Six Sigma. There are people in all fields and professions who are not nice or have an inflated opinion of themselves. Six Sigma is not about self-aggrandizement. It is not about lording over people. Unfortunately, some people are more concerned with obtaining a Six Sigma certification than with appreciating what the newly acquired skills will allow them to deliver to their organization. The priority of Six Sigma training should be to deliver value to one's business and to the customers of one's business. Training to become a Six Sigma team leader gives one skills and tools, but doesn't give one a right to be elitist.

Six Sigma is about getting everyone involved. A Six Sigma project forms a team of people who work together to identify problems and develop solutions. Such teams are not elitist teams rearranging the world for everyone else to live in. These teams are serving the organization by employing the skills and tools they have learned to increase quality and reduce defects. The Six Sigma black belts who are leading these teams are likewise seeking only to lend their skills learned through training.

There are plenty of ways to fail and it is always convenient to blame the tool. If you look hard enough though, the failure is the fault of a lack of planning and training. If an organization does not plan properly and train properly, there is no doubt about the outcome of that program. If management truly has their eye on the goals and is intent on providing quality products and services, then Six Sigma can keep everyone focused and part of the team. The reality is that Six Sigma isn't glamorous and it isn't sexy. It is just plain hard work.

Countering the false idea that Six Sigma is elitist is part of ensuring the success of your Six Sigma initiatives. The best way to do that is training all members of your organization in basic Six Sigma concepts can go a long way toward taking away the mysteriousness of Six Sigma and the elitist misconception some people have. Give people the knowledge and tools they need to do the job and they will thrive. Help all the members of your organization understand what Six Sigma does and how it does it. Not everyone needs to go through all of the Six Sigma training required to reach black belt qualification, but there are simple programs you can put in place to help people learn Six Sigma basics.

If you look only to the number crunching part of Six Sigma and ignore the organizational and human side, ignorance, and the resentment that comes from it, are inevitable. Including everyone affected by the Six Sigma project and giving them information they need to understand what is going on and how they can contribute will yield dividends.

<http://www.6sigma.us/>

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Peter has eleven years of experience performing as a Master Black Belt, and has over 15 years experience in industry as an improvement specialist and engineer working with numerous companies.



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