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Six Sigma Solves Problems With An Unknown Solution

By Peter Peterka

Six Sigma is a powerful business improvement strategy. It helps your organization to identify, reduce, and eliminate defects from any product, process, or transaction. More than a "quality" program, Six Sigma is a flexible and dynamic continuous improvement strategy and process initiative that helps your organization uncover solutions.

For example, you may know that a particular process at your organization is not meeting customer specification or is otherwise not performing adequately. However, the solution is not apparent up front. There are many variables that could be causing the defect in the process. How do you determine what specific action you can take to improve your process and reduce defects? Finding that unknown solution is what Six Sigma does best.

Six Sigma is not a pre-packaged one-fits-all solution. Six Sigma is a process that doesn't impose a particular outcome but discovers the previously unknown solution to a problem. It uses a structured systems approach to problem solving that achieves strategic business results through an intelligent step-by-step process. A structured thinking process helps solve problems better than an ad hoc, blank page approach.

Six Sigma leads organizations through five-steps of realization: 1. We don't know what we don't know. 2. We can't do what we don't know. 3. We won't know until we measure. 4. We don't measure what we don't value. 5. We don't value what we don't measure.

By using Six Sigma to identify and correct major problems you create real data that uncovers previously unknown solutions to problems - solutions that you most likely would not be able to discover except through the Six Sigma methodology. What drives this process is the DMAIC method. DMAIC is an acronym for five interconnected phases of a Six Sigma project: Define, Measure, Analyze, Improve, Control. By going through the structured phases you discover the unknown solution to your quality problem.

First you identify the problem you need to solve. At the Define stage of a project, you should have a defined issue or problem you wish to overcome and improve. Once a process is selected as a

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candidate for improvement, a problem statement is developed and the objective or desired outcome is defined. Progress measures are established and a cost/benefit analysis is performed. Also during the Define phase, you highlight what the project is supposed to do and how it is supposed to do it and what metrics apply. With a clear measurable set of indicators, the Measure phase studies the process to determine the key process steps and variables to determine the potential ways the process could be going wrong.

After measurements are gathered, the data is analyzed to discover what is causing process variation. Once problem causes are determined in the Analyze phase, you find, evaluate through testing, and decide on creative new improvement solutions. As you move through the Analyze and Improve stages of the process you will identify various process improvement scenarios, and determine which solution has the best net benefit impact to the company. Most likely, the variation is from a completely unknown source. Without going through the Analyze and Improve stages you would not have known what improvement was required, much less what categories of variables were being affected!

Six Sigma is about tackling problems with an unknown solution. Six Sigma experts know that there are no one-size-fits-all solutions. Six Sigma training provides participants with enhanced problem-solving skills, with an emphasis on the methodology for identifying and creating solutions. As Six Sigma practitioners, you need to be agnostic. Use the best tools from all of the various methods and apply the right solution to the right problem. Through being agnostic and open-minded you will discover solutions through observation and data rather than just impose solutions from the outside. This enables you to use the best from all of the various methods and tools available and apply the right solution to the right problem. You will be amazed at how well THAT works!

Peter Peterka..

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DMAIC and DFSS. 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.

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.

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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.

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.

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