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Six Sigma Basics

First, you must believe

by Praveen Gupta



Many people believe that they can buy Six Sigma certification and get some marketing advantage. By documenting a few more procedures, they can achieve Six Sigma recognition.

For some, Six Sigma is a fact-based methodology made of fancy statistical tools that solve all business problems. For some, there's a misunderstanding between Six Sigma and karate because of the belts. For others, Six Sigma means DMAIC—Define, Measure, Analyze, Improve and Control. Of course, Six Sigma could also be a software tool that could do anything, like a magic wand. There may be other derivatives of understanding Six Sigma that would lead to a lot of talk without any walk.

Learning Six Sigma tools may lead to some advantages, just like the application of DMAIC may produce some improvement results, but actually practicing the intent of Six Sigma could produce monumental results. When people learn the tools, they look familiar, easy to grasp and even easier to ignore. However, it's difficult to understand the effect of Six Sigma's goal, which is a lot of improvement in a short period of time. Why is speed so important? Just like in Olympics, where the race is won by a fraction of second, businesses are always racing with one another. The fastest one wins.

Going back 20 years, while revisiting past events, I could see that Six Sigma was developed to become best in class by achieving virtual perfection in everything. It was a simple methodology that was rigorously implemented and passionately championed. It produced results, savings of billions of dollars to many companies worldwide. Following are basic tenets of Six Sigma:

- Common goal
- Aggressive goal setting
- Effective learning
- Sharing savings and rewards
- No fear

A company becomes successful when its leaders understand Six Sigma and make it a visible goal by continually talking about it and working hard to achieve it. An aggressive goal setting is fundamental to Six Sigma. As we know, Six Sigma is associated with breakthrough improvement. This really means the solution must be different from simply tweaking the process. For a process to move from its current state of three Sigma or even four Sigma, a 90 percent (10 times) improvement is needed. To achieve Six Sigma level performance, about 20,000 times improvement is needed.

Six Sigma is not for faint hearts. One must have vision, guts, courage and wisdom to achieve such monumental improvement. However, it's important to remember that, to quickly benefit from it, Six Sigma must be applied to customer-critical aspects of products or services. One must apply Six Sigma in every process, not necessarily to everything in the process.

Effective Six Sigma means that one should first learn its intent before learning the methodology and tools. It's statistical thinking and is different from rigorous statistics. Statistical thinking means understanding the nature of variation, cause-and-effect relationships, and making adjustments accordingly.

Six Sigma's excitement brings out positive energy, which leads to broader employee participation synergistically working toward the common goal. It means aggressive, clearly defined goals, understood rewards and communicated consequences of not achieving the planned results. Time after time, humans have achieved unexpectedly great results. Six Sigma means achieving a lot of improvement very fast with passion and collaboration, the sharing of benefits and celebration. Believe it, people with the right thinking make Six Sigma happen.

One of the subtle aspects of a successful Six Sigma journey is driving out fear. Deming has emphasized driving out fear in bringing out the best of people. Employees are encouraged to take risks, learn from mistakes and accomplish breakthrough results. Six Sigma was used to achieve market leadership and the highest profit in the industry. Focusing on sales and costs will alleviate employees' fear of failure

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and of losing their jobs. Six Sigma means more capacity for growth, creating a positive environment and driving out fear.

About the author

Praveen Gupta, president of [Accelper Consulting](#), helps clients in the areas of Six Sigma, lean, business scorecard and innovation. He has authored several books including [Six Sigma Business Scorecard](#) (McGraw-Hill Co., 2003) and [Six Sigma Performance Handbook](#) (McGraw-Hill Co., 2004). Praveen writes monthly for Quality Digest's "Inside Six Sigma" newsletter.

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