

The Dumbing Down of Six Sigma

Will the methodology succumb to the problem it's designed to fix?

One of the most common questions I'm asked is, "How much longer is Six Sigma going to be around?" The answer is quite complex and depends a good deal on the questioner's impression of Six Sigma. What's more apparent is the trend that's accelerated noticeably during the last two years—the "dumbing down" of Six Sigma.

Whereas the methodology is designed to solve a company's toughest problems, the actual practice of Six Sigma has somehow lost much of its steam. Granted, a Black Belt's first project must be carefully selected with "success" properly defined, but with more experience, our Black Belts

should be able to attack the heavy-duty problems organizations face. In many organizations, they aren't.

A primary reason for this dumbing down phenomenon is Six Sigma's unprecedented growth during the last several years. With this growth has come increased variability in how the program is deployed and implemented. Huge variation exists in the philosophies of those who provide Six Sigma training and coaching. Given the amount of attention and press it's received, not to mention its many recorded successes, Six Sigma looks good and promises big savings.

But have you noticed that something always seems to go awry when we chase money? While Six Sigma is about delivering customer value and improving an organization's capabilities and culture, it's also about financial results. Variation in how organizations account for Six Sigma project savings is a major issue and contributes to a growing perception of lack of credibility in the methodology.

There's also great variation in Black and Green Belts' capabilities. Three days of training shouldn't buy anyone a belt of any color. Not that everyone needs the same amount of training to accomplish a

given level of proficiency, but over time this variation in training has produced a highly variable product. We're beginning to see this phenomenon today, and it's accelerating as more Black and Green Belts show up in the workplace. I'm reminded of the words of a former state governor who said, "We're going to make our state No. 1 in math and science... we're going to require every high school student to take two years of math and two years of science." Sorry—it's not possible to deliver excellence through mediocre processes. This holds true for Six Sigma.

Another reason for the dumbing down of Six Sigma is its commoditization and lack of emphasis on human capital. To provide people with truly effective problem-solving skills requires time, patience and commitment. Many organizations resist investing in those things. The quick fix or magic formula is again the lure. With that attitude, the methodology might help us reach some of the low-hanging fruit, but that's all we'll get because we haven't invested in ladders or people trained to use them.

The politically hyped issue of taking jobs offshore is critically linked to developing skilled people because future jobs will go to those who know how to gain knowledge about their products, processes, people and organizations. Many companies rightly use Six Sigma to develop this ability in their workforce. As Peter Drucker says, "Knowledge has become the key economic resource and the dominant, if not the only, source of comparative advantage."

We're starting to see this same trend, though not as rampant, on the international front. Countries such as China and India are hungry for the Six Sigma methodology. However, the variability in rollouts, as well as meaning, will ultimately diminish Six Sigma's effect in those countries, too. All of this brings us back to the original question of Six Sigma's future.

If one considers the methodology a symbol of 3.4 defects per million as a

result of a 1.5 sigma shift, and only that, then Six Sigma will most surely disintegrate. However, if it represents more than even DMAIC—if it's considered a thought process that drives us to make better decisions based on knowledge, which is based on critical thinking applied to information, which is obtained from the proper translation of facts and data—then Six Sigma has a fighting chance to survive a very long time. Indeed, if this is what Six Sigma means to you, it should be part of your corporate culture forever. In 20 years, you might not call it Six Sigma, but nonetheless that's what it will be.

Variation is indeed the enemy, and variation from many sources is contributing to the dumbing down of Six Sigma. It's a sobering thought that the very thing the methodology is designed to combat could very well speed its demise.

About the author

Mark Kiemele is co-founder and president of Air Academy Associates, a leading quality management consulting firm that provides innovative consulting and training services, public workshops, statistical publications, training aids and software to a variety of clients throughout the United States and abroad. He's trained, consulted and mentored more than 10,000 leaders, scientists, engineers, managers, trainers, practitioners and college students from more than 20 countries during his 25-year career. Dr. Kiemele is world-renowned for his knowledge-based KISS (Keep It Simple Statistically) approach to teaching the statistical thought process to practitioners. He has authored numerous articles and texts on the application of process improvement techniques and methodologies.

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