

Six Sigma and Beyond Thomas Pyzdek

Six Sigma Needs Standardization

The International Quality Federation is striving to certify Six Sigma Black Belts.

I recently spoke at the Banas Qualidade conference in São Paulo, Brazil. The conference, titled “International Seminar on Six Sigma,” featured a number of speakers from the United States, Brazil and other Latin American countries. If attendance, quality of speakers and enthusiasm are valid measures, the conference was an unqualified success. I thank all of my new Brazilian friends for the Six Sigma hospitality I received while in their beautiful country.

One speaker in particular piqued my interest. The speaker, a U.S. consultant, presented an interesting case study demonstrating how a team moved a particular process from a very low first-pass yield to Six Sigma quality levels. The speaker described the approach as a trademarked methodology, his own version of Six



Sigma. The approach is detailed and intense, and it utilizes many of the traditional quality improvement tools in ways reminiscent of total quality control. However, the usual Six Sigma infrastructure (the so-called “belts,” leadership champions, flowdown from big Ys to driver Xs, etc.) was missing entirely. In fact, the speaker views the infrastructure with disdain, likening it to a caste system.

Now, I can’t say if the speaker’s approach would work as well as the standard approach in the general population of organizations. For all I know, it may even work better. The point is that when you hire a consultant to help you with “Six Sigma,” you may end up with a system that bears little resemblance to what the majority of businesses consider Six Sigma to be. Clearly, there’s a need for some standardization.

Consider the fate of Six Sigma’s predecessor, total quality management (TQM). There was never an accepted definition of TQM, nor were its practitioners certified

in any way. TQM became whatever a particular consultant said it was. The result was a hodgepodge so confused that business leaders felt justified in calling whatever they were doing TQM. The problem was that most of what was being done was fundamentally flawed, resulting in a more than 80-percent failure rate. Eventually, TQM fell out of favor with leadership and progress stalled.

Six Sigma, by providing a reasonably well-defined approach to TQM, has brought the quest for world-class quality back from the grave. To keep Six Sigma alive, we must identify both what Six Sigma is and what it isn’t. The International Quality Federation (IQF) is taking a first step by certifying Six Sigma Black Belts. To make this possible, it’s been fighting a spirited legal battle to keep the term “Black Belt” in the public domain so it can be used by the business community in general, rather than becoming the property of one particular consulting company. IQF certification requires that applicants pass a rigorous day-long computer-based exam covering the core skill set of the Black Belt Body of Knowledge (BOK), as defined by the IQF. The IQF scores the candidate and determines if his or her score meets the IQF minimum for each section of the BOK, as well as for the overall exam.

Becoming an IQF-certified Black Belt requires more than simply passing an exam. A key difference between Six Sigma and TQM is an emphasis on tangible results. The candidate’s own organization is in the best position to determine how effective the candidate is in applying Six Sigma methodology. Thus, the IQF certification model requires that the individual be co-certified by both the IQF and a “sponsoring organization.” To ensure that standards are met, the IQF requires that the sponsoring organization use certain criteria for assessing the candidate’s effectiveness. The IQF criteria evaluates candidates’ abilities to achieve significant, tangible results by applying the Six Sigma approach and to lead organizational change by demonstrat-

ing leadership, teamwork, project management and communication skills.

The exam is administered by the sponsoring organization, which is responsible for assuring the integrity of the exam, verifying the identity of the candidate sitting for the exam and enforcing time limits.

To enable employees of small businesses to become IQF-certified Black Belts, sponsoring organizations need not be the candidate’s employer. Accredited colleges and universities may serve as a candidate’s sponsor, but the candidate must complete at least two successful major projects applying the Six Sigma approach to significant production or service processes.

The sponsoring organization evaluates the candidate’s effectiveness using the IQF requirements and notifies the IQF when a candidate who has passed the IQF BOK exam has met the effectiveness requirements. Effectiveness means that the candidate has demonstrated the ability to lead the change process in an organization by successfully applying Six Sigma methodologies to one or more significant projects. Success is demonstrated by achieving documented, substantial, sustained and tangible results. Examples are cost savings or cost avoidance validated by finance and accounting experts, improved customer satisfaction, reduced cycle time, increased revenues and profits, reduced accident rates, improved morale, reduction of critical-to-customer defects, and so on. Merely demonstrating the use of Six Sigma tools is *not* sufficient.

If you are interested in finding out more about the IQF Black Belt certification program, visit the IQF Web site at www.iqfnet.org. Organizations interested in becoming IQF sponsoring organizations may e-mail me.

About the author

Thomas Pyzdek is a consultant in Six Sigma and President of IQF. Learn more about Six Sigma at www.pyzdek.com. E-mail Pyzdek at tpyzdek@qualitydigest.com.