

Six Sigma's Unique Infrastructure

Affecting change requires tapping several resources.

Some people contend that Six Sigma adds nothing new to the technical toolkit used to improve business processes. Past improvement initiatives such as TQM certainly share a great deal with Six Sigma: It also has management champions, improvement projects, sponsors and such. However, Six Sigma has added something new: an infrastructure for change.

Six Sigma's infrastructure creates formally defined change agent positions filled by people who possess technical knowledge about the change process. Some observers, especially Black Belts and Master Black Belts, criticize this practice

as creating new "elites" within the organization. I can't argue that this isn't true, but I'm not an advocate of unbridled egalitarianism for its own sake. The question



isn't whether the "Belts" are elites. The question is: Does this approach to organizing for change work better than available alternatives? Let's examine some commonly proposed alternatives to creating a small group of highly trained change agent professionals:

■ *Train the masses.* This is the "quality circles" approach. People in the lowest level of the organizational hierarchy are trained in the use of basic tools and solve problems without explicit direction from leadership. When this approach was tried in America in the 1970s, the results were disappointing. Japanese originators of the quality circles concept reported considerably greater success with the approach. This was undoubtedly due to the fact that Japanese circles were integrated into decades-old companywide process improvement activities, whereas U.S. firms typically implemented circles by themselves.

■ *Train the managers.* This involves training senior and middle management

in change agent skills—not a bad idea. However, if the basic structure of the organization doesn't change, there's no clear way to apply the skills.

Trained managers often return to the same job, and as time goes by, their skills and self-confidence wane. If opportunities to apply their knowledge do arise, they often fail to recognize it. Or, if they do recognize it, they fail to correctly apply the approach. This is natural for a person trying to do something different for the first time. Change agents in Six Sigma learn by doing. By the end of their tenure, they can confidently apply Six Sigma methodology to a wide variety of situations.

■ *Use experts in other areas.* The tools of Six Sigma are not new. In fact, industrial statisticians, ASQ-certified quality engineers, reliability engineers, quality technicians, systems engineers, industrial engineers, manufacturing engineers and other specialists already possess a respectable level of expertise in many Six Sigma tools. Some have a level of mastery that exceeds that of Black Belts.

However, being a successful change agent involves a great deal more than mastery of technical tools. Black Belts, Green Belts and Master Black Belts learn tools and techniques in the context of following the DMAIC approach to drive organizational change. This is different than using the same techniques in routine daily work. Quality engineers, for example, generally report to a single boss and have well-defined responsibilities. In contrast, Black Belts actively seek projects rather than work on anything routine. They report to many different people, who use different criteria to evaluate the Black Belts' performance. They're accountable for delivering measurable bottom-line results. Obviously, the type of person who is good at one job may not be suitable for the other.

■ *Create permanent change agent positions.* Another option for the Black Belt position is to make the job permanent. After all, why not make maximum use of

the training by keeping the Black Belt indefinitely? There are, however, arguments against this approach. Having temporary Black Belts allows more people to go through the position, thus increasing the number of people in management with Black Belt experience.

Because Black Belts work on projects that affect many different areas of the enterprise, they have a broad process-oriented perspective that's extremely valuable in top management positions. The continuous influx of new blood into Black Belt and Green Belt positions keeps the thinking fresh and prevents the "them vs. us" mentality that often develops within functional units. New Black Belts have different contacts throughout the organization, which leads to projects in areas that might otherwise be missed. Permanent Black Belts would almost certainly be more influenced by their full-time boss than would temporary Black Belts, thus leading to a more provincial focus.

Six Sigma's unique infrastructure includes a mix of full- and part-time, temporary, and permanent change agents. It provides extensive technical training to a few, moderate training to exempt employees, and training to most nonexempt employees. It will certainly be improved upon in the future, but for now it seems to be the best bet for any organization wanting to transform itself.

About the author

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