



Applying Six Sigma to Leadership

If you want leaders to support your efforts, you must show them how it's done.

Leading an organization is a daunting challenge. Leaders must keep everyone happy—a delicate balancing act, to say the least. We Six Sigma practitioners are often quick to criticize leaders for not properly supporting our efforts. But what if committed leaders asked our advice on how to actually use Six Sigma to help lead their enterprises? Do we have anything to offer?

The answer, I believe, is yes. When I studied management in college, I was struck by the fact that it focused largely on control systems. There were systems to control expenditures, quality, personnel, work flow, and everything else in the organization. But are businesses all about control? Six Sigma says no. Businesses are about processes that deliver value to stakeholders. Most leaders trained as managers are not familiar with this view of their organization, or how to use it to their advantage. We can enlighten them.

How do leaders create excellent processes?

Philip Crosby once said that quality professionals spend too much time complaining about lack of leadership support. Most CEOs, he pointed out, have no clue what we mean when we say that we want their support. Leaders are doers. We must tell them what they need to do.

Leaders can't achieve process excellence on their own. They must create a process excellence leadership team (PELT). The PELT will be responsible for helping the leader achieve the process goals. PELT members must receive training in their new responsibilities, and they must meet regularly to prepare plans and review progress.

The process of identifying an organization's key outcomes begins by identifying each stakeholder's goals and the organization's strategies for achieving them. Strategies are meaningless abstractions

until the PELT identifies the metrics that operationalize the strategies. Typically, there are too many metrics for a leader to follow closely. Although all metrics are important, the PELT must identify the critical few that will differentiate the organization from its competitors. These "differentiators" will be monitored over time on dashboards that are part of a balanced scorecard.

An organization's core processes are those that serve customers directly. Each core process—and there will be very few—must be defined. An owner must be identified for each core process and given the authority to design and measure it. Ideally, the process owner will have a voice in assessing the performance of functional managers who contribute to the process.

In addition to core processes, there are enabling functions, which don't serve customers directly but provide resources to the core processes. Examples of enabling functions are information technology, quality assurance, and human resources.

Core processes must be linked to the dashboards and balanced scorecard. They must each be mapped to process steps where it is possible to take action, i.e., a specific process step as opposed to an overview. This means that core process activities will be defined in sufficient detail so that their effect on the organization's strategies can be measured. At this level we'll be able to determine the critical-to-quality (CTQ) drivers in the process.

Once process owners have identified the CTQs for their processes, they can generate plans for improving the CTQs. The plans must be validated by mapping them back to the differentiated metrics on the dashboard. The process owners must work to achieve a shared vision of their plans among those who will be involved in executing them.

If the path to improvement involves projects, then a process owner's or functional manager's PELT must identify the projects, prioritize them, and assign sponsors. Project identification involves creating problem statements, business cases, and draft charters. In some cases the PELTs will work with the sponsors to identify project team leaders. Project kickoff meetings that include a member of the PELT or the process owner will give the project team a sense of the project's importance to the organization, as well as help the team determine the line-of-sight link between the project's goals and those of the organization.

Because success will depend on the project teams' effectiveness, top management will want to monitor the project schedules and the project teams' success during regularly scheduled dashboard reviews. Also, because the business environment is dynamic and constantly changing, leadership must meet frequently and review its strategies to ensure that the organization remains relevant.

Leadership is straightforward, but it's far from easy. Most leaders wake up each day and hope that the people in their organization will do great things to move the organization forward. The Six Sigma leadership process makes this much more likely.

About the author

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