



Six Sigma: The human side

Want to improve every facet of your operation? The people you choose to implement this incredible management strategy are the key to your success.

How do you implement a record-shattering new management strategy? You can bring in a consultant to get your employees fired up. You can show pie charts, bar graphs and budget projections all day long. You can back your claims with mountains of supporting evidence. But no matter how convincing it looks on paper, one pivotal ingredient will make or break all of your good intentions: people. Without the right warm bodies—not to mention committed minds—to carry it out, your plan is about as substantial as empty air.

That's why Six Sigma—a management philosophy that touts people power combines with process power and focuses on eliminating mistakes, waste and rework—is proving so effective. Certainly, the process matters but the employees you choose to carry out Six Sigma are truly the heart and soul of the world's hottest business initiative.

Furthermore, according to Subir Chowdhury, author of *The Power of Six Sigma: An Inspiring Tale of How Six Sigma Is Transforming the Way We Work*, the management philosophy has the power to transform careers. In fact, his book tells its story from the point of view of two fictional former coworkers: Joe, who has just been downsized, and Larry, who (thanks to Six Sigma) has gone on to corporate stardom.

"One of the most important elements of Six Sigma is the role everyone plays," writes Chowdhury (in the voice of Larry). "This is the people power side of the equation. Any good football coach will tell you the same thing: Every player must have a specific role, clearly defined, with consequences for not coming through and rewards for doing their particular job well. And that goes for everyone, from the quarterback to the waterboy."

The ultimate goal of the Six Sigma process is to make only 3.4 "mistakes" per every million activities—or to get it right 99.99966 percent of the time. And here, excerpted from the book, are players who will take your company there:

Executive leadership: You've got to have the executive leadership on board, the same way you have to get the owner of a football team on board. The executive leadership has to be the driving force behind adopting the Six Sigma philosophy and inspiring the organization from day one. If the leadership isn't ready to do what's necessary to win, the team won't.

Executive champion: A good CEO will likely appoint one of his executives to oversee and support the entire mission. This sends the signal to everyone else that the company is serious. It might be a vice president or a director of manufacturing or marketing, somebody who's highly visible and has pull. And that executive is called the executive champion.

Deployment champions—Picked by the executive champion, these people provide leadership and commitment and work to implement Six Sigma throughout their businesses.

Project champions—The project champion's job is to oversee, support and fund the Six Sigma projects and personnel necessary to get the job done. This allows the people on the project to focus solely on the project at hand. Project champions pick, evaluate and support the blackbelts in tackling their projects.

Master blackbelts—When a company first decides to go with Six Sigma, the role of master blackbelts is played by outside consultants. They are the people most responsible for creating lasting, fundamental changes in the way the company operates from top to bottom. When the people they've trained are ready, they take over the job of master blackbelt from the consultants.

Blackbelts—The blackbelts are the people who really do the work. They're the key to the whole project, the true leaders of Six Sigma. Blackbelts must have considerable intellect and drive and be willing to think "outside the box." They must have both management and technical skills and the ability to inspire passion in front-line employees and the confidence of the top brass. They turn the Six Sigma vision into reality. They put the rubber to the road.

Greenbelts—The greenbelts provide the blackbelts the support they need to get the project done. They are the worker bees. But because they're trained in Six Sigma, everyone is speaking the same language and is working for the same goals. That's the power of Six Sigma: It's the first management philosophy that runs top to bottom, so everyone's on the same page.

Personal accountability, applied with an eye toward professional advancement, seems to be the engine that drives Six Sigma. Everyone, including greenbelts, can move up through the ranks.

As stated previously, the middle-manager-type blackbelts are the key to making it all work. As Chowdhury explains, they are commissioned to work full-time on the Six Sigma project and are responsible for figuring out how to apply what they've learned.

"It's like General Patton said," explains Chowdhury, who wrote his book to help every employee understand and buy into Six Sigma. "'Never tell people how to do things. Tell them what you want done and they will surprise you with their ingenuity in getting there.' In other words, the more authority you give them, the more creativity and energy you'll get out of them. If something's your baby, and you'll get the credit or blame for it, trust me, you'll work a lot harder."

And, it might be added, your company and career will realize astounding rewards.
