

Communicating Six Sigma

Effective companywide communication is crucial to inspire and encourage employees in the Six Sigma journey.

by Praveen Gupta



The Six Sigma initiative starts with an executive's idea of achieving excellence and superior results. Whether the initiation is based on hearsay or the strategic move, it starts with communication among the executives—or employees. Likewise, throughout the implementation of Six Sigma, constant communication must be maintained within the organization. Because Six Sigma requires great improvement in a short period of time, intellectual involvement of related employees is a necessity for developing creative improvement solutions.

Corporate communication

A direct announcement of commitment to Six Sigma from the chief executive is the first critical step toward efficient communication for a companywide implementation. If the Six Sigma initiative is evolving from a department or a division, some level of communication about the strategy is also important. Many companies start the Six Sigma initiative with a set of projects. In such cases, a straightforward memo is enough to keep communication flowing among the employees who are part of the projects. However, communication from top management is still the best source for informing employees of the intent and evolving plans of the new companywide initiative. The absence of such a communication method may cause employees to resent this lack of information and perceived involvement with the initiative.

For companywide communication, a much broader approach can be taken. In addition to top management memos and announcements, press releases, publicity brochures or pamphlets describing Six Sigma in context with the corporation are prepared. Trinkets like lapel pins, mugs, shirts, sweaters or caps may be distributed. A video of the personal message from the chief executive can be shown or the announcement in a multi-facility corporation may be broadcast through a satellite link. An even better demonstration of the management interest in the new initiative is a live Six Sigma presentation to the employees.

Departmental communication

The departmental communication follows up the corporate communication because various departments initiate Six Sigma-related activities to support the corporate initiative. If the Six Sigma is launched corporate-wide, each department should start the awareness training before the selected employees for further project-related training starts. Once the projects have been identified, a periodic communication of the project performance within and outside the department helps in maintaining the necessary support for projects.

When a corporate level Six Sigma scorecard is established to monitor progress, each department should publish trends and levels of performance measurements. These measurements are reported typically monthly in an operations review meeting, and are shared with the other department managers for resolving any competing issues.

Process-level communication

When Six Sigma is being institutionalized, it gets down to the process level, where the objective is to achieve performance Six Sigma level (i.e., 3.4 defects per million opportunities for its key output or related in-process characteristics). Key measurements are tracked on a trend chart plotted against the continually improving goal line. The monthly process performance is fed into the departmental measurements, while the weekly or daily performance is reviewed within each department. The process level information is communicated to affected employees by displaying trend charts on bulletin board, and brainstorming in departmental teams for continual improvement.

Business-performance communication

Any Six Sigma initiative is launched to achieve specific business objectives (i.e., improve profitability, establish a culture for accelerating continual improvement or innovation, or addressing specific process problems). In either case, there must be a set of measurements demonstrating that the corporation is benefiting from the investment in the Six Sigma initiative. The measures could be improvement in customer satisfaction, field failures, internal defect rate, cost of poor quality, internal cycle time, on-time delivery and financial performance.

Companies track key business performance measurements through scorecards and dashboards. The scorecards, such as the balanced scorecard or the Six Sigma business scorecard provide the methodology, while various software providers offer dashboard. The dashboards are a collection of meters or gages with color codes for good, bad and questionable performances, simultaneously showing multiple measurements. Companies also plot multiple charts on a page to achieve the same purpose. These charts are called

5-up, 4-up or 3-up charts, depending upon the number of charts per page. Some of the distinct aspects of the Six Sigma charts are that an axis may be a log scale due to dramatic improvement, reducing defective parts per million opportunities from several thousands to a few (i.e., more than 60,000 to less than 10, and a goal line).

Recognition and rewards

With all the objective measurements for quality, response time and cost, a strong leadership and its inspiration through recognition and incentives play a significant role in successful Six Sigma implementation. Such subjective measures are difficult to quantify. Successful companies come up with some creative approaches to inspire employees. For example, Motorola used Total Customer Satisfaction team competition and a CEO award for extraordinary accomplishment. Publicizing success breeds success. Recognition of employee excellence inspires more employees to excel. Companies can measure and publicize a number of projects with exceptional improvement or significant savings.

Throughout the Six Sigma journey, communication plays an important role in inspiring employees to excel while enlisting their commitment to Six Sigma. Without an effective understanding of Six Sigma by an organization's leadership, and an effective communication method, it's more likely that the Six Sigma initiative will be a struggle, instead of a success. Corporations must plan up front different communication methods throughout the institutionalization of Six Sigma.

About the author

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