

## Innovation for Six Sigma

Companies must create a culture of innovation and creativity to succeed.

by Praveen Gupta



In simple terms, Six Sigma means quick improvement in a short period of time. Incremental improvement will save a lot of time and money for a company. Breakthrough improvement, therefore, is synonymous with Six Sigma. Breaking rules through innovation is a way to achieve breakthrough improvement. Today, because of the lack of an established process, innovation is an element of Six Sigma training programs or methodology. This is a challenge, because projects are postponed, waiting for the light bulb to turn on. I have been told that a company that's a strong proponent of Six Sigma moves to the next project after a mere 10 percent improvement in its current project. This is project hopping and a missed opportunity for innovation.

There was an article in *Forbes* magazine some time ago that discussed Six Sigma for steady improvement. The article stated that Six Sigma doesn't create innovation. This is due to a lack of understanding about the intent, strategy and methodology of Six Sigma. Innovation, on the other hand, is becoming just another buzzword. Fortunately, innovation isn't meant to replace Six Sigma, it's meant to enhance everything we do, including Six Sigma. Innovation should be incorporated in the body of knowledge of Six Sigma in order to achieve quick improvement in a very short time.

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The following definitions clarify differences among various terms, which are being used interchangeably in the Six Sigma context.

**Creativity**—A person's ability to generate new ideas and perspectives that aren't necessarily practical. They come about by imagining beyond the predetermined space of vision, or by imagining an existing condition in a new way. Creativity manifests itself as astonishment, revelation, novelty, originality or anything extraordinary.

**Invention**—A discovery or creation of an original or new, accidental or deliberate concept, knowledge, process, apparatus, living organism, or device, mentally or through study, research or experimentation, that solves an existing problem and creates a new existing thought process or culture.

**Innovation**—The result of an intellectual initiative to introduce new elements through study, experimentation, discovery to produce a new process or product for the first time, or to improve existing processes or products that are significant and create significant value.

**Genius**—An individual with exceptional intellectual or creative ability, talent and originality to see things differently than others.

Creativity and innovation appear to be very much aligned with the intent and expectation of any corporate Six Sigma initiative. A good way to assess if a Six Sigma program is working is by reviewing if the results are significant and achieved through innovative solutions. In other words, are we improving by doing the same thing, or by doing things significantly differently? Did this allow us to be creative or not?

When emphasizing innovation to achieve Six Sigma results, one must consider creating a culture for creativity and innovation. Innovative thinking must become an integral part of the Six Sigma initiative and must, therefore, be planned for throughout implementation and recognition.

Every employee in a corporation is capable of being innovative. All of us have been proud of something we have done, accomplishment and made to feel like a genius. Bringing out that ability to achieve significant improvement is an expectation leadership must establish and strive for. The intellectual participation of employees must be a leadership mantra. All successful leaders see potential in their employees and exploit it as the only way to achieve sustained improvement.

Innovation begins with the intellectual involvement of employees through their ideas. The process of getting employee ideas or recommendations has been in existence for a long time. However, its effective implementation and success has not been satisfactory. There are many reasons, including a lack of understanding of its value and importance for improving growth and profitability, and a lack of an established process of idea management. It's time to understand and perfect the innovation management process. Just like purchasing, sales, production or quality processes, innovation should become a standard process in every corporation. There must be a leadership commitment to successfully implement the innovation process. Then, an innovation process must be defined, expectations must be established, resources should be allocated and measurements have to be established to monitor innovation value. Most important, innovation must be incorporated into the business planning and budgeting to be visible on the management radar.

The first process in creating innovative thinking is to establish a good idea management program. A high-quality idea management program creates a long-lasting and positive impression on employees' minds through sincerity, follow-up and recognition. Purpose, scope, responsibility, ownership, tools and procedures for the idea management process must also be established. In any way, the handling of unacceptable or not-so-good ideas can be clearly defined and documented, and the conversion of ideas into economic value can be easily realized through training, communication and other business processes. An idea management program about complaints, criticism of management or getting even with workplace enemies. Idea management is all about contributing toward employees' success through their company's success and by achieving improvement. Everyone will benefit by better jobs, growing professionally and earning more.

Recently, I came across a newly formed organization, the [National Association of Idea Management](#) located in Phoenix. This organization is promoting employee engagement and participation. Another group, The Scanlan Group, which is about 10 years old, has been promoting employees' care, gain sharing and positive behaviors. A good innovation process requires all of the ingredients to happen.

Innovation process isn't a new trend. Many people have been developing and practicing elements of innovation for decades. However, it wasn't encouraged at most companies because of the priority given to other short-term objectives. With global competition, innovation and the intellectual assets of an organization have become predominant competitive advantage. Successful leaders must recognize the value of innovation now, and incorporate it into their Six Sigma initiatives, which is already an integral approach to corporate performance improvement. Innovation is a critical intent of the Six Sigma methodology.

3M, Procter and Gamble, Caterpillar, IBM, Motorola and AT&T Bell Laboratories (Lucent), have been good examples of innovation one time or another. 3M has added innovation in their culture for sustained growth and profitability for stakeholders, in addition to their employees.

#### **About the author**

*Praveen Gupta is a Six Sigma consultant and trainer at [Quality Technology Company](#). He is an ASQ Fellow, and has been with Six Sigma since 1986 at Motorola. Praveen also taught Six Sigma at Motorola University for more than 10 years. He has authored [Six Sigma Business Scorecard](#), a Six Sigma best seller and [The Six Sigma Performance Handbook](#), recently he has co-authored [The Six Sigma Black Belt Handbook](#), which is due to be published by McGraw Hill in November 2004.*

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