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## Abstract

Companies are facing challenges in sustaining the energy and resources to continually benefit from Six Sigma. Black Belts face challenges in continuing to work on projects as these are becoming increasingly difficult to identify. Experts are talking about the "Death of Six Sigma."

## Strategies for Sustaining Six Sigma

**Merely supporting the Six Sigma initiative isn't enough any more.**

by Praveen Gupta



Companies are facing challenges in sustaining the energy and resources to continually benefit from Six Sigma. Black Belts face challenges in continuing to work on projects as these are becoming increasingly difficult to identify. Experts are talking about the "Death of Six Sigma."

Company leadership faces challenges, because they feel the need to renew their organizations through new initiatives. Having one initiative year after year could prove to be a boring task for leadership, as well as for employees. Sustaining Six Sigma, just like earlier programs, is a challenge. Some resources must be allocated to renewing the Six Sigma initiatives.

Current paradigm suggests that every tool, methodology or framework has a limited life. In this ever-changing business environment, people are looking for magic wands to solve their business problems. After taking Six Sigma classes, people realize that Six Sigma is a hard task. It requires personal commitment and team collaboration. It needs leadership pursuit for success.

Launching a Six Sigma initiative is relatively easy, whether at a project, or the corporate, level. Get some people trained, find them something to do, publicize the new initiative and forget about it. However, benefiting from Six Sigma in a real sense requires commitment at the highest level for maximizing business growth and profitability. Amazingly, most leaders don't think that way. In their minds, they don't have to be the best in the real world; they just do enough to make some money. The intent to make just enough profit leads to random and unrelated actions that have little likelihood to maximizing results.

Besides successfully launching a Six Sigma initiative, the strategy to sustain Six Sigma must address the following:

- Leadership commitment
- Managing Six Sigma
- Black Belt accountability
- Innovation

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Leadership commitment to Six Sigma is reflected through strategic actions, personal behavior, continual review of progress and expectations from the management team. Strategic actions must include tactics for realizing sizeable business performance improvement in terms of growth and profitability, personal commitment to using Six Sigma for improvement throughout the corporation, and compensation incentives proportionate with the improvement rate. Just supporting the Six Sigma initiative and achieving lots of improvement very fast isn't enough. Personal involvement through sharing Six Sigma-related experiences with employees is a great way to motivate troops.

Managing Six Sigma implies integrating the initiative in the business management system for standardization, audits, remedial actions and performance review. That means, standardizing Six Sigma through various procedures or documents. The procedures must address Six Sigma in process-yield or performance-improvement goals, application of DMAIC, implementation of Six Sigma measurements including defects per unit (DPU), defects per million opportunities (DPMO) and sigma levels. Once standardized through documentation, training and practice, internal audits should review compliance and effectiveness of the Six Sigma implementation. Any inconsistencies or inattention to the Six Sigma practices must be addressed promptly through the root cause analysis and corrective action system. The leadership should then review the Six Sigma effectiveness, implementation of various activities, including the use of DMAIC and results for achieving desired improvement. If it's determined the Six Sigma initiative isn't producing the desired results against established goals, a highly visible and systemic remedial action must be initiated.

Six Sigma Black Belts are the change agents for corporate performance improvement. That's why the role of Black Belt must be defined. Six Sigma Black Belts aren't supposed to be the statisticians roaming around trying to conduct design of experiments. Instead, the Black Belts must be working business leaders facilitating dramatic improvement by reducing waste using Six Sigma intelligently. In other words, Six Sigma isn't for every project, for every problem and for all the time. Six Sigma thinking is for everybody, Six Sigma measurements are for all managers and Six Sigma projects are for specific opportunities that need significant improvement for directly affecting the bottom line. Black Belts must be continually scouting for such bottom line opportunities and driving the improvement through intellectual participation of employees. Intellectual participation implies enlisting their ideas in developing innovative solutions to achieve great improvement very fast. Black Belts must hold themselves accountable for of the amount of improvement Six Sigma generates and report success of projects. Black Belts must identify areas or challenges in completing projects and remedy barriers to the improvement.

Innovation has been unintentionally excluded from Six Sigma vocabulary. Great improvement can't happen very fast without innovative thinking and attitude. In simple terms, innovation means doing things differently. Black Belts must realize they can't achieve much improvement very fast by doing the same thing over and over, or by fine-tuning existing processes. They must explore new possibilities, eliminate nonvalue-added activities and make processes more efficient. Innovation can no longer be seen as an art only performed by some elite individuals. Innovation must become everybody's overriding responsibility. In today's competitive global environment, the word acceptable isn't acceptable anymore. Businesses must make excellence elementary, thinking a must-do activity and innovation a standard process.

#### **About the author**

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