

Six Sigma's Misunderstood Method, Part 2

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This is part two of a two-part piece. [Part one](#)

[can be found here.](#) [1]

Ultimately, at a fundamental level, all of the Six Sigma tools, problem-solving methods and language around variation serve a single, fundamental purpose. It gives us the ability to make informed data-driven decisions. *It is a decision-making methodology.*

This is critically important, like wheels on a car critically important, yet in my many years as a Six Sigma specialist, I've never heard anyone say it. This lack of insight is also, I believe, a root cause for failed Six Sigma programs.

Play along with me. We've established that the enemy of Six Sigma is variation. Well, to truly identify, map, quantify and understand variation, we need a solid understanding of statistics and statistical tools. Unfortunately, most of us entered our professions with little or no statistical background. Therefore, a great deal of intense training and education is required.

Many businesses look at the intensity of the training and the consequential investment, and start seeking a pragmatic and affordable way to introduce the methodology. This often leads to select members getting the training, and the rest of the business receiving an introductory crash course that focuses more on the language or dictionary of Six Sigma than on understanding how it works or saves money. (When I say, "how it works," I don't mean DMAIC, I mean how variation wastes money and how the statistics will make decision-makers wiser.)

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As a result, only a very few people in the business may truly understand. Now those few people must constantly negotiate with everyone else, who may or may not understand, for data, information, permission to alter processes and resources for experiments. It's tiring. Believe me. Worse, these specialists will spend hours trying to figure out how to explain what they observe to a manager or executive, so that the leader can make an informed decision. Most times they must explain what took them months to learn and days to solve in 30 seconds or less, or they lose the leader's attention.

Now, I ask you, does any of that sound familiar? Now, imagine the alternative. The leader/decision-maker asks an aid to run a specific study, and draft the charts and results because that leader wants to see the variation of a specific process. Better yet, the leader does the work. Then, with all of the process improvement and statistical skills, and understanding what variation costs, that person makes an informed decision.

Suppose the leader wants to make a change to the process. He or she shows the analysis and results to the process owners and participants, and because they too understand the analysis and the importance, they collaborate on how to best improve the process and it is immediately executed.

Which scenario, do you suppose, works best to drastically improve business performance? It seems obvious when we put it in these terms. The second scenario, of course, works best, and it is what we observe in those organizations that have truly incorporated Six Sigma and will swear by its effectiveness.

Here's the difference. When we get a select few people educated and put them to task trying to improve processes, we missed the point. Those few people are the only people in the business who truly understand how to use the statistical data and understanding of variation to make better decisions. Unless you are going to dictate that everyone must do what this elite team says, they must fight with everyone in the business to accomplish their mission. It is a recipe for failure.

However, when the decision-makers understand why variation is important, they can actually assess how much it costs and make smart, forward-thinking decisions. Six Sigma works best when all of the decision-makers in the business have the tools and understanding to use the Six Sigma method. Yes, accomplishing this is difficult and time-consuming, and it requires a major cultural overhaul. It is unpleasant, and this is why it is often not accomplished.

It's easy to say that Six Sigma is just too difficult, and that is why it fails. I think that, to say such, is neither accurate, nor insightful. Yes, the mastery of statistical tools requires a great investment in training, but businesses train people in skills and tools all the time. I believe the failure occurs when the *right* people are not given the skills and tools necessary to follow the Six Sigma philosophy.

Take a look at your own Six Sigma program. Do your decision-makers understand why variation is bad? Are they capable of assessing how bad? Do they have the skills and tools to quantify the variation, and communicate what should be done to

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make more money or save money? If the answer is “no” to any of these, you now have a mission which, if accomplished, will turn your Six Sigma program from doubtful to distinguished. Change the answers to “yes.”

The DMAIC problem-solving approach, and the suite of critical-thinking and statistical tools are not the magic that makes Six Sigma work, though they are often the focus. The magic is in the principle that variation is a cause of lost profits, and in ensuring that your decision-makers have the skills and understanding to act according to that principle.

Improve your Six Sigma program by reflecting on how well your decision-makers understand, and how skilled they are at assessing and managing variation. Don't let the complexity and intensity of the statistical skills deter your organization from enabling your decision-makers to be wiser.

Six Sigma can make, and has made, a huge difference for many organizations, big and small. Don't become one of the failure examples. Instead, consider the observations above and enable your program to be one of the great successes.

Stay wise, friends.

To read part one of this two-part series, [please click here](#) [1].

What's your take? Please feel free to comment below!

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