To Learn Lean or Six Sigma

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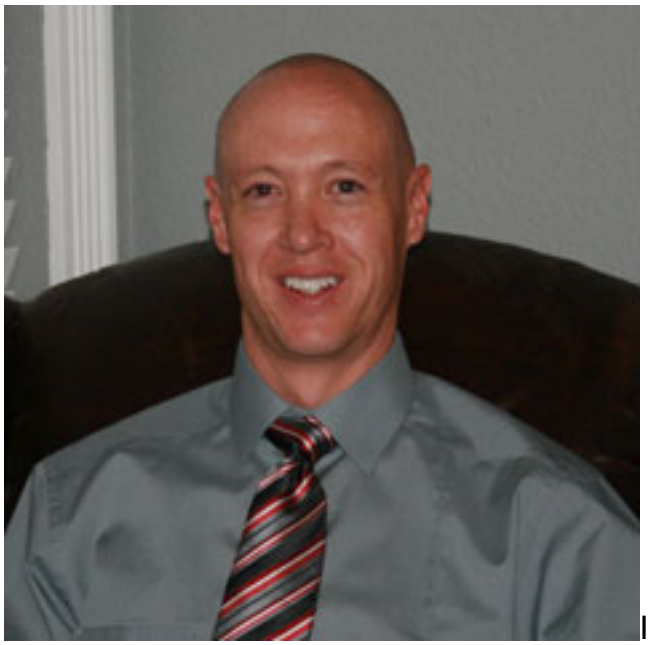

I was recently talking with a friend of mine who is between jobs — a victim of a recent layoff. He has a plethora of skills and experience, including program management and market analysis, and a master's degree in education. He explained that many of the recruiters he works with are showing him "business analyst" positions and asking if he can fill those roles.

According to the recruiters, business analyst roles are on the increase again, and skilled analysts are in demand. His questions to me were, "Do you think I should get certified in Six Sigma? Should I get certified in something else?" Good question.

In response, I explained to him the typical investment in both time and money to get a recognized Black Belt education and certification (often difficult to do if you don't have a significant business project to demonstrate your proficiency and understanding), and also a Lean education and certification. Either one is a big investment for an individual to take on.

In the end, I loaned him two of my books to read to comprehend both Lean and Six Sigma, so he could make a more informed decision. There certainly isn't any harm in at least being able to talk in an educated manner about the principles and philosophies of Lean and Six Sigma.

If you are curious, the books I loaned him were as follows:

1. *Lean Thinking*, by James Womack.

2. *Six Sigma for Managers*, by Greg Brue.

Lean Thinking says it all when it comes to understanding the Lean philosophy and principle methodology. It's the original and the standby resource. *Six Sigma for Managers* explains the *Six Sigma* principles, methodology, and success criteria very well without diving into the statistical and related problem-solving tools specifically. It's a great read to understand *Six Sigma* without going through the entire training regimen. I recommend them both.

During our short conversation, I explained that, in my observation, both Lean and Six Sigma experience a mixed bag of sentiment across industry. Perhaps Lean still receives more interest and praise than condemnation. *Six Sigma* certainly has its share of both. While many businesses still practice either or both, and some are still adopting either or both for the first time, there are also a great number that will not adopt either and some that are abandoning them or backsliding in their focus.

The reasons for the mixed sentiments are varied and sometimes complex. I suspect I could write a whole book based on my observations alone, ignoring those of my peers, which would not do the subject justice. So, a difficult dilemma remains. How should I answer my friend's question? Perhaps some of the readers will comment to this post with their observations and opinions. What is your business's stance on either Lean or Six Sigma?

My own opinion, and my advice to my friend,nis summed up as follows. There is no harm in understanding Lean, Six Sigma, or any other process or business improvement program, or methodology. They are both excellent business improvement programs, when implemented correctly and effectively. They both teach excellent problem-solving fundamentals and strategy. It is the latter that is, in my opinion, most important, particularly for the role of business analyst.

Therefore, I recommend learning something, anything that produces the problem-solving skills and business understanding. Also, be able to demonstrate that understanding and discuss how it relates to the various popular programs many have adopted. If you already possess demonstrable skill and success, go with the demonstration, not the credential.

I believe that regardless of what title a program has, good fundamentals and problem-solving are the real skills and understanding to possess as a business analyst. The name of the program merely identifies which language a company speaks and what tools are the standard in the toolbox. Language and tools are easy to learn in comparison to the skill of identifying, understanding, planning out and solving problems.

I've worked with many problem-solvers lacking Lean, Six Sigma or other formal improvement program educations that could solve problems much more effectively than a few Black Belts and Master Black Belts whom I have encountered. The certificate is not always an indicator of skill, understanding, talent or proficiency.

Rather than trying to satisfy the written, spoken or unspoken desire for a specific certification, which may or may not meet the expectations of some portion of industry, perhaps it is best to demonstrate and highlight experience and success with improving business performance regardless, or irrespective, of a specific methodology.

If a good problem-solver can demonstrate successful business improvement, and can also intelligently discuss the philosophic approach and principles of some of the various programs or methodologies, would that suffice? Or is a certificate really the make-or-break essential? I'd hate to think it is the latter.

After all, there are other programs and methodologies on the rise right now. One in particular that I have been researching is called Quick Response Manufacturing. I don't know how far the idea will go, but the principles are sound enough as far as I can tell. Someone with a good foundation in business and process improvement should be able to learn Quick Response Manufacturing methods quickly enough.

I say focus on the business understanding and problem-solving, not the program certificate. I say this to both those who are hiring, as well as those looking for success.

That is my opinion, based on my experience, which of course, has long since become an amalgamation of all of the diversified tools, methods, strategies and philosophies I've encountered and used over the years. I gave my friend the introduction resources and advised him to understand those first, before getting carried away chasing certificates.

Did I tell him correctly? Did I offer him poor advice? What is the right answer to give my friend? I'd hate to see him investing so much in a certification that may turn as many off as it turns people on. I like to think that others see things my way — that fundamentals are more important than specific language or standards. Please comment with your advice.

In the meantime … Stay wise, friends.

What's your take? Please feel free to comment below! For more information, please visit Nicol via www.bizwizwithin.com *[1].*

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