

Six Sigma: From Rigid to Flexible

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Many executives shun Six Sigma because they feel that it's too rigid. Are they right?

While it's true that Six Sigma training sets out strict project phases and tools, the initial training is only half the story. The real payoff comes from breaking old institutional patterns of learning and avoiding assumptions about the root causes and effects of problems. When it's done right, Six Sigma can be the antidote to corporate rigidity.

Like any new skill, Six Sigma requires learning the basic steps. Each of the five phases of Six Sigma – definition, measurement, analysis, improvement, control – is designed to encourage “acting on fact” rather than on anecdotal evidence or hearsay. People often skip these phases because they think they already know the solution or they don't have time for more structure. How many times have you heard colleagues say, “Why don't we just try this and see if it works?” That's the type of habit that Six Sigma attempts to break.

Inexperienced problem solvers tend to take action rather than ask the simple yet important questions. Instead of talking to customers about their needs, for example, they might assume that customer needs were well-defined in the past and haven't changed. Sometimes they will hold an internal brainstorming meeting to guess at those needs. When customers are finally engaged, either the problem scope changes or the team determines that there isn't a problem at all. The questioning strategy isn't easy, but it can be learned through mentoring by seasoned problem solvers.

Beyond investing in mentoring, what can leaders do to help the Six Sigma culture to take root? First, they must signal the importance of Six Sigma work by holding regular reviews with project teams. Second, leaders must reinforce the value of a questioning strategy. “What evidence led you down this path?” ought to be heard at every meeting.

Good Six Sigma practitioners not only need to learn the tools and how to apply them. They need to recognize when it's better to try something else. The problem, however, is that the standard ways of teaching Six Sigma tend to result in overkill, inflexibility, and fear of breaking away from the recipe.

One solution is to have mentors teach tools just in time. When a question surfaces that requires a specific tool, the student learns the tool in context and does not waste time in over-application. Another path involves flexing a tool based on specific needs. A full theoretical approach might have a student collecting statistically significant samples to prove a point when all that is really needed is a few samples to disprove that point.

Is rigidity a bad thing? Not if it stops your organization from leaping to conclusions. It is a necessary step in the transformation of the culture. If an organization remains in that rigid state, however, it will never realize the full power of continuous improvement. That power comes through investment in sound questioning strategies, mastery of the toolkit, strong mentoring, and consistent, effective project reviews.