Imagining The Future Of Lean & Six Sigma, Part 2

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This is part two of a two-part piece. Part one can be found here *[1].* [2]

Now let's discuss Six Sigma. Six Sigma, too, attacks a very real demon. That bad guy is named "variation." It is a real and true deficit to our businesses to expend resources, time and energy desperately trying to control outcomes that are continuously changing and unpredictable.

The aim of Six Sigma is to control processes well enough that their outcome is always stable and always predictable. This is a noble objective, and it is a winning business improvement philosophy. Unfortunately, Six Sigma has some greater challenges and has experienced some greater failures than Lean, by comparison.

Perhaps the greatest challenge to Six Sigma is that the act of perceiving, understanding and quantifying the variation in our business requires skills that most of us did not acquire in high school or college, namely a solid understanding of statistical analytical methods and mathematics. That means that to execute Six Sigma, we must all learn some relatively sophisticated new skills.

The need for special new skills drove a very common practice, that while it had some very pragmatic short-term successes, it failed to fulfill, in most cases, the long-term need. That practice is the institution of an expert team of Six Sigma process improvement professionals.

Many businesses, instead of training everyone in Six Sigma and statistical methods, hired or trained a special team of experts who were then tasked to go forth and make improvements, and train other people as they went. Unfortunately, the results promised by Six Sigma didn't manifest to the degree expected and these teams have now populated unemployment lines, and some businesses have abandoned Six Sigma as a solution that costs more than it saves.

The reason for the failure, in my observation, is that the specialized team approach fails to change the cultural behavior of the business and its management. In order for Six Sigma to manifest significant improvement, the business must change the way it makes decisions. Decisions must be made with the intent of overlooking short-term optimization and instead focusing on long-term variation reduction.

A team of specialized advisors usually fails to exert enough influence on managers and executives to change their decision-making habits. So, the program fails to achieve the results expected.

Businesses that truly infused Six Sigma thought process into daily decision-making practices are few, but they achieve great benefit. Most businesses failed this objective. Six Sigma, I perceive is on the decline. I find it unfortunate because it is a

good weapon against a real demon, but I also feel that I understand it.

Colleagues who have recently interviewed candidates of General Electric upbringing tell me the candidates confess that GE no longer practices Six Sigma, or at least not with the vehemence it once did. Likewise, my colleagues in Honeywell, formerly of Allied Signal (one of the earliest adopters and successful executers of Six Sigma when Motorola first revealed its secret to success) also hint that Six Sigma is no longer the business mainstay that it was. It's dying out inside of its greatest proving grounds.

Those observations shared, I also perceive that the inquiries to my credentials and expertise, and requests for my help have risen sharply in recent months. People are engaging experts and hiring back Six Sigma skills, but the role is, in my observation, shifting. Generally, the desire for specialized teams is much diminished. The requests for expertise are paired with needs for leadership and management skills.

Those businesses hiring back Six Sigma-skilled people want them in management and leadership roles, not in advisory roles. This is as it should be. The war on variation must be fought with daily decision-making, not with expert process-improvement assault teams.

Six Sigma — as we have all come to either love or hate — I suspect, will diminish; however, in those places and businesses where the understanding that variation is the enemy, and with a willingness to seek out and place decision-makers with the skills to identify and quantify that variation, the vision of Six Sigma will live on.

I often wonder if part of the downfall of Six Sigma wasn't its name. It distracts us from the real mission. We become so focused on a vocabulary that only mathematicians were ever comfortable explaining and a nearly impossible idea of three parts in 1,000,000 defective, that we lose sight of simply trying to manage variation in a pragmatic way. In fact, I've met many a Black Belt that didn't understand that Six Sigma is a declaration of war on variation until I put them to the test and then explained it. Sigh.

I offer a quick thought on Design for Six Sigma (DFSS). Six Sigma proved difficult enough for so many organizations, that few went to the next level and tried to install DFSS. Ironically, the true power to change business performance in a manufacturing or product-based business lies not in the production processes, but in the product design. After all, the design dictates the production processes and sets them up for success or failure.

Also, I found teaching DFSS methods to engineers and design teams, though some tools are more demanding, to be easier than teaching Green Belt Six Sigma skills to most of the rest of the business. The design teams were usually quicker to adopt the practice and make it part of their way of things than the rest of the business. DFSS often became the pull that necessitated the rest of the organization to get up to speed on Six Sigma and not just talk about it.

If I were to start a Six Sigma-based program from scratch at a new or existing

business, I would start it with the product design functions, not the production functions, and leverage that to pull the production and other functions into the new way. No matter what, it would be something everyone does, not just an elitist team.

Give some thought to the observations above. If they ring true with you, then lay your plans accordingly. Let the trends show us where the wisdom lies. Get away from overblown improvement events and move toward incremental, everyday improvements as soon as your culture will allow.

Simplify. Stop the practice of following recipes demanding complex tools and complicated calculations. Try to spin back toward commonsense problem-solving and doing the minimum necessary to make the decision and introduce a simple solution.

Move away from specialized teams and elitist groups. Place the expertise in the roles in which decisions are made. Make the practice something everyone does. Whatever you choose to use, or whatever you call it, don't give up on exorcising demons like waste and variation.

Whether your own experience and observations reflect mine above, or you refute the observations I offer, consider the trends you perceive in the business improvement programs you know. Those things that make the programs successful or make them fail will be the same success or failure elements for your own program. Listen to the winds. Let them guide your vision and plans going forward.

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! For more information, please visit Nicol via www.bizwizwithin.com [3].

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