

## The Case for Six Sigma

20 years since the term was first coined and Six Sigma is still active. Given the tendency for business fashions to come and go, there must be something in Six Sigma for it still to be making waves. This paper looks at what Six Sigma is, or can be, what it has contributed, and how the reader can take advantage of it in the future.

Defining Six Sigma has been a problem from the start, given its birth in the new product development field in Motorola, its growing up in traditional manufacturing in GE, and its widespread distribution around the world over the last 10 years. Six Sigma can mean a target, a methodology, a tool set or a programme name. Before deciding if it's useful, it's therefore necessary to define it.

PMI's definition of Six Sigma as a programme approach is:

***“A comprehensive and continuing effort to transform the performance of the organisation through process optimisation, innovation and variability reduction.”***

It is based upon principles, methodologies and tools that have been developed over 80 years. Not all Six Sigma is the same however, so you need to develop your own understanding in order to make an informed choice.

## Achievements of Six Sigma

The core of many Six Sigma programmes is to identify important projects, allocate some of the brightest people to them, train them in improvement, and maintain a high profile of support. Well managed, this approach generates success in specific projects. In fact it is usual to achieve benefits that pay for the investment several times over. The reader should have no doubts about the potential for this approach to create tangible and intangible improvements when properly positioned and supported.

## Things to consider in using Six Sigma

Leaders can only understand the implications of Six Sigma by immersing themselves in its application. They do not need to become technical experts; they do need to learn about learning, to work on their whole system, understand how to reduce variation and waste, and how to involve everyone in this work. These are the components of Dr Deming's System of Profound Knowledge, which we have demonstrated to be essential in countless applications around the world.



Leaders and practitioners also need to understand how to integrate many other methodologies and approaches beyond Six Sigma, for instance Lean and innovation.



Process Management International

One of the factors that makes Six Sigma potentially so effective is the availability of training programmes such as the CQI/ PMI Green Belt course, which enable leaders to build their capability and skills through application. Leaders really can be practitioners.

## **Looking ahead for improvement and transformation.**

The Six Sigma approach can make a profound contribution to improving performance if it is strategic, integrated and aimed at improvement, not just problem solving. In this context it provides the structure for systematic approaches to processes, variation, projects and so on that have been validated over many decades.

The key factor in success for Six Sigma is therefore leadership. Today's leaders are in an envious position compared with those of 20 years ago. The challenges may look different but are mostly rooted in process variation, language and people, just as they always were. However, the principles, methodologies of Six Sigma and its close relations in Lean have been shown to be universally applicable by good leaders. 20 years ago it was hard for newcomers to team, now it is much easier.

Better still, you can adopt this approach under you own banner, you do not have to use someone else's slogan. But please remember to tip your hat to the greats of yesteryear who enable us to actually generate improvement. We can all take advantage of the discipline of Deming, Juran, Kano and Ishikawa, to name but a very few to go beyond Six Sigma, to genuine transformation.

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