



[Return To Previous Page](#)

Ask the Expert

The Topic: Six Sigma and Employees



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Q: What should a company planning to launch a Six Sigma initiative tell its employees about the program and what it is expected to accomplish?

A: The truth. By that I mean discussions with employees should include not only what Six Sigma is, but also the company's reason for undertaking the deployment. There are multiple reasons an organization will choose to deploy Six Sigma, anything from quality to economics and shareholder value. Generally some mixture of these reasons will push the deployment with primary focus on one specific driver.

The primary focus for the deployment will have a great deal of impact on expected accomplishments. For instance, if the purpose behind the deployment is primarily financial, employees should be told about the financial situation of the company and the need for improving the value proposition. If the focus is on improving quality, communications should contain an explanation of customer quality expectations and current level of performance to those expectations.

Additionally, employees should understand their own roles in the deployment as well as those who will be leading the projects. And employees should know the expected outcome of projects. Six Sigma is primarily about changing the culture of an organization's problem-solving strategy. Culture change will succeed or fail in accordance with the quality of communication leading the process.

Employees will follow leaders who know how to manage; this includes the Six Sigma program. If the employees of a company do not trust the management in the basic day-to-day running of the business, they will not trust the Six Sigma deployment either. Using data can improve management decision-making but it cannot make bad managers into good leaders.

Conversely, if employees trust their managers, they will continue to trust them through the Six Sigma process. One way to insure employee trust is to measure the participants of the Six Sigma program to the same degree we seek to measure our processes during projects. Measure not only the savings realized but also the level of team participation, communication and leadership being driven by the company's Black Belts and Master Black Belts.

Q: Does your company have a policy concerning employees whose responsibilities may be affected by process changes? If yes, please describe it. If no, why?

A: Employees whose responsibilities are affected by project improvements are redeployed to another area of the company. It has been the policy of our company to insure that the projects undertaken are not focused on headcount reduction. No company can guarantee that a Six Sigma project will never lead to a reduction in headcount, but undertaking a deployment specifically for this reason would be tantamount to setting the process up for failure. The

Q: How can a company convince employees to fully support Six Sigma when process improvements and productivity increases may lead to fewer jobs?

A: The message has to focus on the positive aspects of what Six Sigma can do for the company. Conversations should be directed to the positive opportunities provided by a Six Sigma deployment, such as how improving quality will lead to new business both with existing customers and prospective customers.

There is a valid argument that in depressed markets, improved productivity can lead to headcount reductions. However, allowing the organization to dwell on the negative aspects of improving processes will not serve the employees or the company well in the long run.

Shift the focus from why it cannot work, to how it can work. The most important thing is to make sure the leadership of the company stays positive. Remember, employees will be afraid of losing their jobs; one wrong word from the leadership team can undermine the process. If the leadership team cannot remain positive throughout the deployment, the employees will not either.

Q: What should employees look for in their company's Six Sigma program to see that it is good for them as well as the company?

A: Employees should look at the metrics being used to measure the success of the projects under way. Understand the focus for improvement, quality, scrap, yield and all the things that make the company a better supplier or that improve customer satisfaction. Another key indicator of the value of the project will be the focus on employee health and safety.

first time a reduction in customer orders drove headcount reductions, the blame would be put on the Six Sigma program and all support would cease.

Basically, all improvement processes have encountered this dichotomy. Any company's success rests on the skill of its employees. But can a company be competitive in its market and maintain the trust of its employees by providing employment even when the company is at risk?

Q: Has Six Sigma had a positive or negative effect on employee satisfaction in your company? How do you quantify it?

A: Employee satisfaction has greatly improved during the last three years of our four-year deployment. As with all new processes, the first year was spent in communication and building the understanding of the process. During the last three years, the company has built that understanding to a point that Six Sigma is requested by the employees of the organization in order to improve their processes.

Of course, data speaks louder than conjecture. So we have an annual survey process to gather team member satisfaction data from all Six Sigma project participants. This data is used in our annual Black Belt review process as a key metric for overall rating. The feedback we get from the employees guides us to any deficiencies that need to be addressed, as well as providing us with an understanding of those outstanding Black Belts we have throughout the company.

Reader Feedback

Would you like an expert opinion on a specific Six Sigma topic? Formulate one to five questions focused on that topic. Please make sure the questions are general enough to help a broad audience. Then submit the general topic along with the questions to [iSixSigma Experts](#).