

The Right Approach

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There are volumes of work that have been published detailing the success of quality management systems based on ISO 9001, AS9100, TS 29001 and other similar standards; the same goes for the documented success of problem-solving and improvement approaches, such as Six Sigma, Lean, TQM, RCA etc. If you research any of these on-line, your results will show hundreds of success stories, illustrating how such approaches can be successfully applied in virtually any industry or profession.

When we consider the documented success of such approaches, it's amazing that any organization which has not adopted such sophisticated measures remains in business at all. Surely they can't be as competitive as their peers in the marketplace with such superior capability. The progressive organization has learned to execute their operations with the precision of a laser scalpel; the dinosaur relies on outdated processes with the exactitude of trying to eat peas with flimsy, plastic cooking spatula. The organization who has the lowest DPMO, the most procedures, great process maps and the most black belts must always win.

With such overwhelming success, I'm surprised that I continue to regularly encounter folks who are steadfast in their belief that these approaches are nonsense; that they don't work. To these individuals, such approaches are nothing but "flavor-of-the-day" initiatives, a combination of buzzwords and over-hyped methods, gestures or tricks with no end result other than to line the pockets of consultants at the expense of the well-meaning organization. This later opinion is inconsistent with the documented results - surely there is something missing. With so many documented success stories, there can't be anything wrong with these approaches, can there...?

Unfortunately, many of these later opinions are based upon valid reasoning; they are the views of individuals who have seen the failures personally; they have suffered through poorly managed projects, tutelage under the guidance of less-than-capable consultants, and have experienced the disastrous results of ill-conceived initiatives. Huge costs have been incurred by the organization, countless hours have been wasted, personnel have been reassigned and morale has been left shattered. What began as an optimistic attempt to improve the condition of the business has either made no impact, or has left the organization in a worse state than ever before.

Which side is right here? Are these approaches successful or just hype?

We need to quit trying to address with this subject in absolutes. There is no "one-size-fits-all" solution; there is no global solution that can be applied in all cases. Each business has their own unique needs, circumstances and business objectives. Such approaches can be wildly successful; they can also be absolute failures. You can't just say the "ISO 9001 doesn't work", "Six Sigma doesn't work", or "Lean doesn't work". It just may not work for you. The same goes for saying that any of these approaches does work, without exception.

We incorrectly attribute the success (or failure) of an approach almost exclusively to the methodology itself, without taking into consideration the context in which it was applied, or the need which it was intended to address. Each of the aforementioned approaches (ISO 9001,



Lean, Six Sigma, etc.) has some degree of merit, and each has been successful in their own right. Each has its own unique strengths and weaknesses. The "right" approach however, is the one that fits best with your organization.

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