

Why Six Sigma Doesn't Work (part 1)

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I've been promising for several months now that I'd get around to writing on this topic. While I initially intended to write only one article, this has now evolved into a series - there was just too much to say on the subject. We've all heard and read about the successes at GE, Motorola, Honeywell (Allied Signal), etc. that have been attributed to the great methodology that is Six Sigma; I wanted to take a look at the down-side of Six Sigma, as I don't think its failings receive nearly as much attention.

In consideration of this topic, I took some time to discuss the failings of this methodology with a number of Six Sigma professionals, and my commentary that follows is partially based on these discussions. For the Six Sigma practitioners reading this, I want to point out at the outset that I'm not going to attempt to present my results with any sort of statistical terms; I'm not trying to address Six Sigma using Six Sigma. I'm presenting my own personal opinion, based on my own professional experience, supplemented with any common themes that emerged.

Since this is the first of several articles on "Why Six Sigma Doesn't Work", I think it's only fitting to begin with the fundamental step of selecting (or in the context of this discussion, erroneously selecting), Six Sigma as our problem solving method. I'm not saying that this is the primary reason why Six Sigma fails, however it definitely is towards the top of the list. It just happens to be that, when we look at the "big picture", this issue is first in sequence.

The great American playwright Mark Twain once said "*if all you have is a hammer, every problem looks like a nail*". While nearly every Six Sigma practitioner is quick to parrot this sentiment (apparently their "Six Sigma toolkit" also came with a book of quotes), there is an overwhelming irony here, as it's these same individuals that often go on to validate this statement in their application of the methodology. Rather than considering Six Sigma as a business tool, which should be used to compliment other business problem-solving approaches, Six Sigma is promoted in a dogmatic fashion, as a panacea for all of the problems a business may encounter.

Your business may not need Six Sigma. Before you launch an organization-wide Six Sigma initiative, consider what you're trying accomplish. For example, I have a pool at my house and a two-year-old toddler. For my son's safety, I don't need a Six Sigma initiative; I need a fence around my pool. We select Six Sigma as part of our solution before we've considered the problem to the extent that we've exhausted all other possible solutions. Other companies have been successful with Six Sigma, so we feel that we should be able to replicate the same successes. There may, in fact, be other options more appropriate to our specific situation.

I was once told, by a successful and respected Six Sigma professional, that the best approach to problem solving was to "*begin with MSA, followed by DOE, then finished with SPC*". There are only a few things I could disagree with more (several of these with follow in later articles). If we apply the analogy of driving a car from point "A" to point "B", wouldn't we need a different set of directions based on each unique starting point? You wouldn't use the same directions to drive from Houston to Chicago that you would if you started in San Francisco or New York. What if you were to fly instead of drive, or even take a train? In this case, we're detailing our problem-solving approach before we've really considered what the actual problem is.



Improperly selecting Six Sigma as our problem solving approach is first on my list of why Six Sigma fails. We didn't need it to begin with, and as a result we've committed to using an approach that isn't relevant to our situation. Six Sigma doesn't work because we've tried to solve our business problems with a buzzword.

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