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What comes after Six Sigma?

By Paperitalo Staff

I mean – what's next? Six Sigma as a quality philosophy is getting pretty old. Under this name, "Six Sigma," it has been around since the 1980s. Its root discipline, statistics, is much older than that. Heck, I took an undergraduate college course around 1970 or 1971 called Statistical Quality Control that had everything one needs to do the Six Sigma program.

I must admit, I am not a "Black Belt" or a "Green Belt" (maybe I am green with envy, maybe that is my problem). I have always found these sorts of programmatic disciplines to be good for folks that have a high school education (and hence, a rather shallow grasp of mathematics) but for others, I think they are a crutch. It works like this: We have a Six Sigma Program. End of subject, we have reached heights which cannot be exceeded.

This leads to an obvious conclusion: we are going to stay with the basic processes we have and not bother exploring other ways to do things. We are going to get to 3.4 defects per million (the classic definition of six sigma) and that is good enough for us. Do you see why this is good for the tactical thinkers but totally inappropriate for the strategic thinkers?

The older I get, the more I have become interested in creativity and communications.

Let's tackle communications first. Engineers and scientists are notorious for lousy communications skills. Arm them with an analytical tool like Six Sigma and they become "Lord of the Numbers." They love it – they have plenty of numbers and they can prove that you, Ms. Machine Operator are at least a slacker and maybe even an idiot. How is that going to make you feel? What are you going to do after they leave your area? A little sabotage, perhaps? How are you going to feel the next time they come around? Are you going to be welcoming Black Belts with open arms? Are you going to give them any more than a minimum modicum of respect? Probably not. Personally, my experience tells me Six Sigma is an enabler for number crunchers and a placebo for management (We have a Six Sigma program, how can we possibly get any better?).

Six Sigma without a concomitant management communications program is fraught with danger.

I have been struggling with how to teach creativity for a long time. You don't need very many creative people, but you need a few around to handle the items you may miss. They are very hard to find and even harder to develop. A recent book I have been reading is called, "Imagine: How

Creativity Works" by Jonah Lehrer. One of the best I have read on creativity. When I try to get creative myself, my personal trick is to juxtaposition items, like comedians do. I have told you before to come to work a different way, park in a different place, take a different route to your office.

We were out with some family members last Friday night, at a bluegrass concert involving wine. One of the family members, an artist, was frustrated that her creativity seems stifled. I told her to build a platform on the roof of her house and go up there and sit for an hour a day. We'll see if she does it.

Creativity is important, probably more important than quality (certainly more important than data about quality delivered poorly). If you think you have communications under control, you just might want to read an online article in Forbes entitled "New Study: HR Departments Completely Out of Touch."

A quick story and we are done. Two other gentlemen and I showed up as the new management team at a mill a long time ago. The mill had three recycled boxboard cylinder machines. They were making a whopping 111 tons per day each. I was in charge of maintenance, engineering, and technical, a bit player in the scheme of things. The person who was the mill manager got the facility to 400 tons per day in a year, basically using Six Sigma (although it did not exist then) principles and his excellent communications skills. No capital. I left after a while to pursue other interests as they say (hasten to add – I wasn't fired, it had become boring for me). A year after I left, this same manager removed one paperboard machine completely and made 400 tons on the two remaining ones. Still no Six Sigma. Still no capital. That is management, creativity and communications. And Six Sigma would never have gotten this mill to this place.

For safety this week, remember to bring all your skill sets to the game when the game is safety, which is all the time. You may not set production records, but for goodness sake, whatever you do, don't get hurt.

Be safe and we will talk next week. ##