

Are Your Change Agents Now Defending the Status Quo?

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Abstract / Teaser:

Far too many cases, Black Belts, Champions and other Six Sigma professionals have arguably become the enemies of needed change.

Back in the day, when Six Sigma was new, CEOs were told that “Black Belts are change agents.” In fact, some companies, like Bombardier, even called them agents instead of belts. And you know what—Black Belts were change agents, and many still are today. But in far too many cases, now well into the second decade of Six Sigma’s influence, Black Belts, Champions and other Six Sigma professionals have arguably become the enemies of needed change—even though once they were change’s best advocates and drivers.

There is simply no single management method or program that is right for all companies at all times through all economic and business circumstances. If there were, we’d all still be wrapping our organizations around Quality Circles and teambuilding, or TQM, or Reengineering. But we’re not, because the macro economy evolves and goes through important cycles related to recessions and booms and interest rates, for instance.

Six Sigma, or Lean Six Sigma, are no different. These programs are simply responses to evolutionary change, which of course we know is constant in nature; it’s inevitable that what was once a priority or imperative later wanes in the face of some new need or imperative based on new circumstances and cycles.

Take Seagate Technology for example. Once hailed as a benchmark deployment, the Six Sigma program, Master Black Belts and all, was simply blown up in 2009, along with a number of key executives, including the CEO. Why? One can only speculate, but I (David Silverstein) believe it's because the changes brought about at Seagate had, indeed, grown stale and had become the status quo. And this is not only true at Seagate; it's true in many other companies as well. I was a manager at Seagate when Six Sigma was launched—and boy was there a lot of change—just about all for the better. I left many years ago, but when I was asked back to Seagate in March of 2008, for a global Master Black Belt conference, I was disappointed to see how little things had changed in the prior five or six years. Change had stopped; Six Sigma was no longer about change. So when Steve Luczo, Chairman and former CEO retook the helm and wiped the slate clean, even though people were shocked, I think he made the right decision. Let me tell you why, and what I think happened.

The first generation of Six Sigma practitioners (at Seagate) had to figure out how to bring about change with relatively little guidance, as they were truly on the cutting edge of change. They were energized, motivated and constantly learning. Change was rampant and everywhere. Then the second generation of Black Belts learned from the first about what to do and how to do it; relatively speaking, this second generation got a lot of help from the first, so by definition they were a little less like pioneers and a little more like settlers. Sure, the second generation improved processes, but the energy and force of change started to fade, if only a little.

When I spent that day at Seagate in March of 2008, I can't tell you how disappointed I was to see so many of the same faces I knew 10 years ago. I wasn't disappointed because the faces were the same per se, but because it became very clear to me very quickly that there wasn't a lot of forward-looking energy to what the next wave of change would be. As I spoke with people about what they could be doing differently to evolve their commitment to operational excellence, it became clear to me that they weren't open to change and felt that everything was just fine the way it was. They managed their deployment in accordance with "the policies" and "the process" they had worked so hard to establish. After all, that was the one proven Six Sigma success formula, right?

Not to be too philosophical, but we do know one thing about history: everything proven once is disproven later, not so much because it wasn't true to begin with, but because our knowledge of the world simply changes over time; this knowledge then leads to new advancements which, in turn, require us to change our organizations and the way we do business to keep current—and to ensure we get the results we desire.

So what started as a radical departure and change-making drive at Seagate later became an engrained cultural and programmatic preference, even one worth defending in the face of a new challenge and need for change. The original conquerors became the quintessential settlers, which, while it seems unfortunate, is far more often the rule than the exception. By the time the third generation of Six Sigma practitioners came out of the gate at Seagate, the change game was over. Now, if not at Seagate then at other companies, we do Six Sigma this way or that way because that's the way we've always done it. Six Sigma became the cliché it was originally designed to crush.

If you think CEOs haven't noticed this, think again, as more than a few with whom we talk are

saying that they're looking outside the Six Sigma ranks for their next change agents. When you recall how and why Six Sigma started, this should feel shocking, even humorous, as the irony is obvious.

Let me drive the point home with a wartime analogy whereby a military unit charges to take a hill or some tactical position. Maybe winning even the whole war depends on how successful you are at taking this hill, so your commander tells you this could be the best thing you ever do for your country and yourself, so fight like hell and, by all means, win. So your unit takes that hill, and you lose two men in the process, and you take some shrapnel in your left shoulder, but you're alive.

What's the first thing you do when you take that hill? You plant the American flag in the soil and get ready to defend the position with everything you have—because if it's not worth defending, it wasn't worth fighting for in the first place, right?

I can tell you that the troops at Seagate fought very hard in 1998 for the budgets and the best people and everything else they needed to make Six Sigma a success. That's why Seagate banked over \$100 million in savings due to Six Sigma in just its first year.

Now in 2010, the world is different, and there are new hills to take. And taking these new hills often means abandoning hills we took in the past, just like it is in military life. You take the hill, plant your flag, catch your breath, lick your wounds and move on to take the next hill because there is no time or luxury for settling in and celebrating too long. And nothing stays constant enough to justify not always looking forward to the next strategic and tactical maneuvers.

One innocent and good person at the Seagate conference asked me a question after my presentation: "Dave, do you think it's time we should start looking at integrating Lean with Six Sigma?" My answer: "Well, it's past due, long past due—and if I were you, I'd be asking what world-class organizations are doing now to not only look beyond Six Sigma but to look beyond Lean Six Sigma. That, of course, includes Seagate."

As I answered, I had a sick feeling in my stomach. These self-proclaimed change agents were not about to charge up the hill. They were Black Belts, and they were about to start a year-long discussion to evaluate my answer. Steve Luczo didn't give them the luxury of that time. And he was right to not do so.

There's always a hill to take and secure, but there's never time to celebrate or relax for too long. Once a change agent, always a change agent. Avoid constancy like the plague. And by all means, don't be that guy or gal who once fought for change only to defend it later. Hold on to the new program or priority only tightly enough to make it happen, then let it go, because it's temporary at best (even though it 's required for good reason).

Those are the platitudes. I'll leave the practice up to you.

3

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