Anbu was the archetypal HR Manager. A topper from the best B-school in the country, and international stint and now heading HR function at the MNC, Anbu always believed he was CEO material. He was passionate about people and firmly believed that if tapped properly, individual excellence can

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Recruitment, training, competency mapping and performance appraisal - Anbu was in deep love with all aspects of HR. And he couldn't care less about anything that had nothing to do with HR. But it happened one day: out of the blue.

The company, like many others all over the world, was charmed by Six Sigma. The CEO's task force was formed with the best of minds from the company. And Anbu was assigned the project of suggesting ways of implementing Six Sigma first in HR and then across the company.

Six Sigma and HR, do they gel? Anbu was shocked. They didn't. Six Sigma was all about quality and processes, he thought, and HR about people. He always felt that processes cannot change unless people make them happen. But you can't disappoint the CEO, can you?

He knew that Sigma was the symbol for the standard deviation. But what does Six Sigma mean? Well, Anbu discovered that it referred to the variations in the performance in relation to stated limits as defined by the customer. Six Sigma, simply stated, means achieving six standard deviations between the mean performance and customer expectations. If this could be achieved, though he wasn't sure how, Anbu calculated that the defects would drastically reduce to only 3.4 mistakes for every million activities. This would mean getting it right 99.99966% of the time.

He soon found, to his surprise, that Six Sigma was not all about cutting costs or boosting the bottom line. It was a culture of doing things right. Profitability was but an outcome of productivity. And it was much more than processes. It was about improving processes by participation of one and all in the organization. The aim was customer satisfaction.

And then one day, Anbu stumbled upon on an interesting piece on how an organization was the epitome of Six Sigma to the world. To his pleasant surprise, the organization was not a MNC nor was it in New York or Los Angeles. It was right here in Mumbai. The Dabbawalas of Mumbai were practising Six Sigma with precise efficiency and were delivering home cooked food to their customers to almost near perfection.

To be effective, HR professionals also needed to understand business processes thought Anbu. And to deliver results, HR has to understand the expectation of the internal customers: the employees of the company. HR could also play a role in channelizing the pool of human capabilities by aligning them to processes. Anbu couldn't help thinking loudly. "We, as HR professionals, need to design and use tools that can help us gauge customer expectations. We also need to evaluate whether the HR interventions deliver the required level of service expected by the customer. Only then, can we give high quality service at low cost thus enhancing customer satisfaction".

That brought Anbu to another important issue. He needed to know the aspect of HR service that were of utmost importance from his customer's perspective. That's what the Six Sigma folks referred to as 'Critical To Quality' or 'CTQs' in Six Sigma jargon. He soon found that he was presented with many 'opportunities' viz; chances of getting it right or wrong.
If Six Sigma provided Anbu with a new found focus to serve the employees (his customers), it also provided him a tool to improve his processes. 'SIPOC' was the acronym for the key parameters of any business process viz; supplies, Inputs, Process, Outputs and Customers. The interesting discovery for Anbu was how he could use this tool in all HR interventions.
Be it selection, employee development or reward and recognitions, the process could be easily divided into these five metrics. For example, if training was looked at in the Six Sigma context, the 'Suppliers' were internal faculties and external trainers. The inputs were the training materials and the know how imparted in the form of attitudes, skills and knowledge. The various sub-processes in training included training need identification as the first step. This then led to designing the program, coordinating with employees and trainers for organizing the same and finally evaluating the effectiveness of training. What could be the output? Of course, enhancement of knowledge and skills as also inculcating the right attitudes. As always, Anbu found that his 'Customers' were the management and the employees.

The words of Dr.Edwards Deming reverberated in his mind: People don't cause defects, systems do. A defect is more likely a sign that the system needs improvement rather than the negligent attitude of an individual. Anbu drew a list of standardized services with a low variability of tasks where Six

Sigma could be applied. He felt that payroll and benefits processing services was one area. He couldn't but appreciate the wisdom of the words of Edward Baker, author of 'Scoring a Whole in One': it is application of the technique that matters.

Anbu soon found that measuring human performance is harder than measuring manufacturing product output. As he pondered over the major factors affecting human performance, he zeroed in on four. These were hiring systems, management practices, training and development and environmental factors. Though the right knowledge and skills play a key role, a lot depends on the employee's motivation to perform. Eh, was he not talking on similar lines of critical competencies? Anbu was happy to be on familiar ground.

Surely, training needs to be based on identified competency gaps. Is training the panacea to all ills? No, Anbu's thoughts flowed; I need to look at the requirements of all my customers. May be I need to design individual development plans as each of my customer is unique and so are his needs. He couldn't believe it. He was talking Six Sigma language.

The base line for every other HR system, Anbu soon found, was hiring. Hiring the wrong man for the job costs a lost to the organization by way of productivity differences. Hence Anbu felt it should be considered a primary source of Six- Sigma error. He recollected that he had read once that the annual cost of these differences was about 19% of annual salary for unskilled workers and 32% for skilled and semi-skilled workers. As for managers, it was a high as 48%. If the average package of a manager in a company is Rs 40,000, Anbu reasoned, a company with 100 managers may lose 40 lakhs per annum from a 48% average productivity difference. He could now see how the selection process was linked with overall profitability. Anbu read that when Citibank launched its Six Sigma program for banking services in 1996, it defined a defect as any customer rating below the two highest responses on a satisfaction survey. He decided to adopt a similar pattern to identify process defects in HR service. But for that he would first have to organize an Employee Satisfaction Survey. He was determined to eliminate wastes and inefficiencies that do not lead to maximum employee satisfaction. Last but not the least, he took upon himself of tracking and measuring continuous improvement in the HR processes of the company.

Anbu jotted a few opportunities for improving employee performance:
„« Develop clear job description listing authorities, responsibilities and span

of control for each position in the company

„« Develop clear and measurable job standards and goals

„« Develop internal and external hiring and selection tools that assess critical competencies required for the job

„« Assess competency gaps and design customize development plan for each employee

„« Integrate competency development, performance appraisal and training with quality management systems of the company

„« Seamlessly weave mentoring and coaching into performance evaluation of senior managers.

Anbu wondered why no one had ever mentioned Six Sigma to him in his B-school days. It seemed to him that HR and Six Sigma were 'made for each other'. Just then his CEO walked in. "How is it going?" he asked. Being a HR professional, Anbu knew that often the bottleneck is at the neck of the bottle. He was glad his CEO and core management team were committed to Six Sigma.
The Director-Corporate Service Group, Anbu's immediate superior, was nominated by the CEO as the Executive Champion. His role was to oversee and support the entire mission. Everyone in the organisation described him as a no-nonsense man. He was known as a man who delivered results. And Anbu was handpicked by him and referred to the CEO to be nominated as a Deployment Champion of Six Sigma in the company.

It was now upon Anbu and his team to select the Project Champions. The Deployment Champions, of whom Anbu was one, would have to work closely with the consultants to help coach the first batch of Master Black Belts. Then they also needed to motivate a team of Black Belts. The Black Belts would need to think laterally and carry the passion of Six Sigma to the shop floor. The success of the project would however depend on the whole hearted supported of the process owner or the Green Belts. All this was challenging. Anbu loved challenges. He had now found a new love:

Six Sigma. He couldn't wait to get going.