10 Defects That Can Damage Your Lean Six Sigma Initiative

One of the most common mistakes companies make when implementing Lean Six Sigma is not preparing the organization well enough for the magnitude and velocity of change that will occur. Every area of the business will be impacted, typically to a large degree. Thus, any organization that does not treat its Lean Six Sigma effort as a full-blown program—with all the accompanying commitment, communication, training, technology and other supports required—is setting itself up for failure.

Below, we break down this fatal mistake into its root causes. Designing your Lean Six Sigma initiative without these defects will guarantee the best chance for success.

#1 - No Burning Platform

A burning platform for change simply means that the pain associated with not changing (the status quo) is greater than the pain associated with changing (the Lean Six Sigma initiative). A burning platform helps reduce resistance by providing a compelling and real reason for implementing Lean Six Sigma to its fullest potential.

#2 - Ineffective Communication

As the old adage goes, "Tell them, tell them again, and then tell them what you just told them." Effective communication about the Lean Six Sigma initiative requires a concerted effort. Starting with the planning stage, messages should be consistent, frequent and comprehensive (reaching all geographic locations or business units, and using varied mediums).

In addition to the "5 W's" (who, what, when, where and why), deployment leaders and Champions should plan for early successes that can be publicized internally to demonstrate positive results.

#3 - Poor Infrastructure

Just as you wouldn't build a house without a solid foundation, you shouldn't build a Lean Six Sigma program without a well-defined infrastructure specifically designed to support the initiative. A successful Lean Six Sigma foundation includes:

o An organizational structure with clear lines of accountability.

o A management system that monitors project progress (tollgate reviews), as well as quarterly and yearly progress.

o A project tracking system (enterprise software) that is thoughtfully implemented and well-utilized.

o Available knowledge and procedural supports for moving through DMAIC and Lean Kaizen Events.

#4 - One-Dimensional Project Selection

Project success is critical to program success. Thus, it's worth taking the time to review each potential project from several angles. Of course, hard dollar savings (or revenue) is an important factor. But does the potential impact justify the degree of project difficulty? Does the project align with program and corporate objectives? What is the priority of the project with respect to others? Answering these and other key questions before committing resources to a project will ensure a healthy project pipeline that delivers on the promises of the Lean Six Sigma program.

#5 - Meaningless Metrics

Just like project selection, metrics should be multi-dimensional to track the success of the Lean Six Sigma initiative and highlight areas that need improvement. This means linking projects with business objectives in a quantifiable way and establishing validated measurement systems at the project level. It also means developing special metrics for the Lean Six Sigma initiative...

...related to the number of practitioners trained, the drop-out rate, the number of completed projects (both on-time and late), the number of abandoned projects, the financial benefits and costs, and so on.

#6 - Wasting Intellect

One of the eight wastes that Lean thinking seeks to eliminate is the waste of "intellect," which is the failure to fully utilize the time and talents of people. In the context of a Lean Six Sigma deployment, this waste can be avoided by:

o Implementing a consistent process for selecting, developing and rewarding key players.

o Carefully crafting job descriptions for key players including Champions, MBBs and Belts.

o Matching candidates with assignments based on their abilities.

o Specifying the number of full-time practitioners needed to reach a critical mass, and putting systems in place to allow this to happen.

#7 - Inadequate Training

No two Lean Six Sigma deployments are exactly alike, so why should training be one-size-fits-all? Today there are many options available for educating everyone from Executives and Champions to Belts and Process Owners. Companies that invest in professional Lean Six Sigma training should look for a varied and comprehensive curriculum, one that can be adapted to fit the specific needs and learning styles of the organization.

Other important considerations include well-defined certification criteria and instructors with real-world expertise. Finally, the training company should be willing and able to "phase themselves out" by helping the organization internalize training though the development of Lean Six Sigma Masters.

#8 - Half-brain Thinking

Traditionally, process improvement initiatives have been dominated by quantitative or analytical "left-brain" thinking. However, many organizations are beginning to realize that creative and intuitive "right-brain" thinking contributes to a more balanced performance excellence approach. Thus, the Lean Six Sigma program should support

"whole-brain" activities (analyzing and quantifying, planning and organizing, creating and synthesizing, motivating and connecting). It's also important to balance Lean and Six Sigma; the initiative shouldn't be dominated by one skill set or the other.

#9 - Not Showing the Money

Although financial benefits should not be the only consideration when selecting projects, the projects you select will likely have some tangible benefit. However, if these benefits are not tracked, it will be difficult to prove that the program is making a positive contribution. Defining categories for financial tracking is the first step. Once the Lean Six Sigma program is underway, care must be taken to consistently estimate and monitor benefits at the project level, including re-evaluating project financials at different stages of DMAIC. Integrating the Lean Six Sigma project tracking system with the accounting system will make these tasks easier.

#10 - Lack of Support

Support for Lean Six Sigma is imperative at all levels of the organization. Top management must not only talk the talk, they must also walk the shop floor, office floor and production floor. When leaders don't attend meetings, for example, or don't support incentives and rewards, managers lose trust in using Lean Six Sigma to address their most important business issues. Champions who have too many other organizational responsibilities contribute to the "lonely belt" syndrome, leaving practitioners to feel as if they're on they're own. Process owners, too, can feel abandoned if they are not properly trained to maintain the gains made by practitioners.

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