

# Six Sigma: Achieving Near Perfection

What does it mean to achieve perfection? The oldest definition, as written by Aristotle, defined perfection as that which is complete, that which is so good that nothing could be better, and that which has attained its purpose. Aristotle's definition provides three different flavors of perfection, but all pretty much starting from the same recipe – being finished in a flawless manner.

How often do you think about achieving perfection? If you're a perfectionist, ahem, you might naturally and unconsciously strive for perfectionism in all that you do. If you don't tend toward perfectionism, you might have to be more concerted in your efforts to produce near-perfect output.

The concept of Six Sigma has its basis in perfection and the notion of delivering products or services that are near-perfect. In fact "sigma" is a statistical term that measures how far from "perfect" a process or product is when complete. The object is to get as close as possible to having zero defects when producing a product.

Six Sigma refers to the desire to reach near perfection, roughly no more than six deviation points from the mean. That means producing a product or service that has no more than 3.4 defects per million items produced; a product that's 99.9997% accurate in terms of its quality.

Companies are learning that using Six Sigma successfully amounts to a cultural change and requires a shift in thinking throughout the entire organization. But the payoffs are huge:

- ★ Increased profits and marketshare.
- ★ Improved customer satisfaction.
- ★ Enhanced employee satisfaction.

Six Sigma uses Project Teams to work on solving problems or improving processes in an effort to produce zero defects. Similar to Total Quality, Six Sigma differentiates itself by using statistical analysis of lots of data to help measure the current and desired outcomes of a process.

Project Teams are comprised of individuals that are identified by their knowledge of Six Sigma concepts in the form of a ranking. Similar to the rankings achieved in Karate, different belt colors signify different levels of interaction within a Six Sigma Team. Team members learn roles and techniques needed for Six Sigma transformation in varying levels, but unlike Karate, don't need to progress through all the levels to reach a certain designation.

The levels in Six Sigma are:

- ★ **White Belt** – has been taught a high level overview of Six Sigma and how it works. A great introduction for all employees in an organization utilizing Six Sigma.
- ★ **Yellow Belt** – considered a subject matter expert, these individuals have a specific knowledge about an area that might not be of primary focus on a Project Team, but bring specific knowledge about their function or area.
- ★ **Green Belt** – usually earned by a project member who needs to have a good grasp of the Six Sigma concepts to be productive in Team discussions.
- ★ **Black Belts** – are Team leaders who have learned Six Sigma techniques of facilitation in great detail. They are trained in change management and are taught leadership skills needed to run a successful Project Team.

- ★ **Master Black Belts** – are individuals who are authorized to teach other Black Belts. They can also mentor and oversee projects using their deep understanding of the statistical needs of the Project Team.

In an earlier article I introduced the concept of Six Sigma, the players involved, and the fact that Six Sigma can be applied to any organization and to any area of an organization from Manufacturing to IT. What we haven't discussed is how Six Sigma can be used specifically in HR.

As subject-matter experts, HR might often be involved on company-wide Six Sigma Teams as Yellow Belt team members. In this role HR is asked to help with issues in other departments that might impact or utilize HR. But, what about using Six Sigma within the HR Department itself? What types of things can HR analyze and improve using Six Sigma?

The answer is simple; anything that is measurable. Six Sigma relies heavily on data and the ability to measure and analyze information that defines a process or product. So anything that needs to be improved within HR is a target; from accomplishing tasks faster to being more efficient with resources. Such projects can include:

- ★ Benchmarking compensation and benefits
- ★ Improving payroll administration
- ★ Decreasing time to hire new employees
- ★ Increasing employee satisfaction
- ★ Curtailing costs: recruiting, training, recordkeeping, compensation and benefits, etc.
- ★ Reducing absenteeism
- ★ Correcting retention issues
- ★ Developing an employment brand
- ★ Evaluating and providing adequate employee communications
- ★ Consolidation of employee information systems
- ★ Improving any process from grievance handling to payroll processing
- ★ Implementing electronic performance reviews
- ★ Identifying tracking mechanisms for paid time off and FMLA
- ★ Streamlining orientation and on-boarding processes
- ★ Revamp training to improve efficiency

This is just a short list of ideas. Once you get a Team assembled to start brainstorming areas of improvement for HR, it may be hard to stop them. Just remember to involve all the players within a particular issue. For example, if Marketing is partially responsible for employee communications, have a member of the Marketing Department (acting as a subject matter expert – a Yellow Belt) on your Six Sigma Team to make sure you are evaluating the current situation accurately and creating optimum solutions. These Yellow Belt Team members can add a lot to the discussion and often think of solutions that Team members too close to the problem might not easily see.

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