



By Ron Medved

THE BEHAVIORAL SIDE OF SIX SIGMA

“Six Sigma” is a TQM spinoff designed to improve a company’s performance by identifying and eliminating “defects” in manufacturing and service-related processes. Developed (and trademarked) by Motorola in the mid-1980s, the system has been adopted by a number of Fortune 500 companies, who claim it resulted in significant cost savings.

The management system is based on statistics and the discovery (in the 1920s) that three sigma from the mean is the point where a process requires correction.

The following is a column by a consultant at The Pacific Institute on the implementation of this system.

For organizations implementing Six Sigma, our clients tell us, there is one further requirement in addition to a commitment from leadership, the right new tools, and a focus on quality. That requirement is for a deeper understanding of human behavior.

The success or failure of an organization’s Six Sigma implementation will eventually center on its people. Process orientation notwithstanding, willing and engaged people do eventually make the difference. Consider the following behavioral perspectives.

Many Six Sigma implementations fail because of sabotage. Not overt resistance, but the silent, subtle, “so maybe this program will go away” kind of resistance. People won’t likely be aggressive, but will instead display what we call passive-aggressive behavior. For example, a Six Sigma implementation imposed exclusively top-down can create a counter-force – a bottom-up, nonproductive “push-back.” If this happens, there can be much waste, frustration, and many false starts.

Learning how to make change nonthreatening – both individually and organizationally – is a blessing to a Six Sigma implementation. We have become myopic in our work. It is only natural. We work hard, manage time, and focus on our bottom line. We habitually look at our business from our own point of view.

Putting oneself in the customers’ shoes requires learning how to step back and “option-think.” Analyzing customer solutions includes the skill of seeing things differently, assuming different perspectives. It means acknowledging a bigger picture. Learning how to unlock from habitual ways of thinking and working can actually be fun and inspiring. If thinking differently is encouraged in the organization, it becomes the basis for employee engagement.

When analyzing organizational processes, Six Sigma practitioners often do a “root cause analysis.” Systems are usually the culprit. Fix the system and things work better. Employees become more effective. Customers are delighted.

SOLVING PROBLEMS AT THE ROOT CAUSE

But sometimes problems can be tenacious. Often there’s a complexity that includes the most interesting variable of all – people. If we want to change for the better, a fundamental understanding of how people think and how their beliefs affect their performance must be factored into the equation. An appreciation of the basics of human behavior and performance enhances analysis. Better yet, it helps managers and employees solve their own people problems.

At The Pacific Institute we study, translate, and teach social-cognitive theory. Through our education, we explain how thinking affects behavior. First of all, what we’ve experienced with our clients, is that most people enjoy learning what’s “right” about them. It is thrilling to gain a deeper appreciation of one’s own thought process. It is self-validating. It feels good.

Strengthened with this awareness and new learning, people can eventually face the other truth about the brain. The fact is it sometimes gets in the way. The brain can create blindspots. Thinking may lead us into the future, but it also can keep us stuck. What we have thought and done in the past unfortunately can become the obstacle.

Learning is best when it is based on self-discovery. This kind of learning is deeply satisfying. Most importantly, it is the basis for an important organizational attitude – the establishment of employee “buy-in.”

MAKING THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE

Organizational culture is the sum total of our shared habits, attitudes, beliefs, and expectations. A culture also shares an unspoken commitment – to keep things the same.

A culture self-regulates to what is “like us.” It is only natural. Having access to tools that makes culture visible is essential. It is an important baseline. What is our collective mindset? The answer marks the beginning of the cultural change journey.

Ron Medved is vice president for business development at The Pacific Institute. He can be reached at rmedved@pac-inst.com

t The Six Sigma management system can save money by fixing your company’s defects and helping your culture change for the better.