Lean Six Sigma Will Not Save Your Business By Itself

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Summary

- DMAIC is great at structuring an improvement effort but misses on directing which area to improve
- Smart organizations deliberately plan what to improve & foster the spirit of continous improvement
- A prepared improvement initiative will achieve greater results faster.

Preparing for a Lean Six Sigma DMAIC Effort

One of the great things about the DMAIC [1] approach is the systematic way it helps folks attack an area that needs to be improved. However, DMAIC has a limited capability to suggest which area to attack and how to kick-off the effort.

Which Area to Improve?

Many of us may think this is a silly question - it's the thing that's on fire. In many organizations where crisis management is the normal operating behavior, we can identify with the problem of the day. Often this is dependent on who's looking and who can make the most noise about a problem. This is not the best way to identify what to improve.

Strategic Objectives. Every business should have a strategic plan, if not, the business has bigger problems than what can be fixed by DMAIC. Strategic objectives point to what's important for a business to focus on, and the operational processes that enable those objectives should be operating effectively and efficiently. If they're not, this is a good place to invest. An example, a data services company differentiated itself by meeting its delivery promises. One strategic objective was "Meet or exceed our customers delivery expectations". However, the company failed to deploy their services on schedule more than 50% of the time, which caused much consternation and rework, and ultimately cost the company real dollars in both lost productivity and customer perception.

Continuous Improvement Organization. Some organizations have internalized the spirit of continous improvement where most of their team members have embraced the notion of never being satisfied with the status quo. This is good. The community will be identifying improvement opportunities as a matter of their daily work. The key will be in enabling the improvements to occur on their own and having a way of elevating visibility for those improvements that go beyond the capability and resources of the initiating organization. Again, it's important to prioritize the improvement opportunities in context of what's important to the business, and this comes back to the strategic plan.

How to Kick Off the DMAIC Initiative

Assuming that there is an improvement area that needs to be solved, what do we need to do to make sure the improvement effort is successful? Each improvement effort should have four (4) clearly documented and understood items:

1. ***A clear problem statement.*** The problem statement [1] includes 1) a vision statement (i.e. what would the world look like if the problem went away), 2) a brief description of the problem (a problem well defined is half solved), and 3) the methodology by which the problem will be solved

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(e.g. DMAIC).
2. ***Defined boundaries.*** A definition of the work (process, resources, assets, geography, etc.) that is within scope for the improvement effort.
3. ***Improvement Objectives.*** One or more SMART [2] objective(s) that can be measured to assure desired improvement(s) have been achieved.
4. ***A Trained Improvement Team.*** A sponsor, an improvement leader, and a number of stakeholders who are responsible for defining & implementing the improvement path. In Lean Six Sigma vernacular this would include a Champion, Black Belt or Master Black Belt, and Green Belts or Green Belt candidates.

Conclusion

The DMAIC method is a great process to follow when you must solve a relatively defined problem. However, we must exercise some constraint to be sure we're not trying to solve every problem. We must use our business instincts and our planning abilities to make sure we're solving the right problems at the right time.

[1] DMAIC - Define, Measure, Analyze, Improve, Control
[2] SMART - Specific, Measureable, Attainable, Relevant, Time Bound

- Quality Excellence [2]

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