



Why Six Sigma Projects Fail & How to Prevent It

This White Paper is intended for Black Belts and Green Belts

Why Six Sigma Projects Fail

Despite the increasing popularity of Six Sigma as an effective improvement methodology, many Six Sigma projects fail to deliver expected savings.

The number one reason why Six Sigma projects fall short of expectations is a ***lack of management engagement at the right level of the organization.***

While a lack of commitment and sponsorship is the leading cause of project short falls, there are several other important reasons for project short falls, including:

- Lack of team cohesion and leadership
- Lack of effective tools to support projects and optimize the process
- Difficulty leading distributed teams
- Lack of sustained Management engagement

Where Do Six Sigma Projects Fail?

The results of a recent survey published on isixsigma.com shows that **60% of respondents cited ‘lack of sustained executive sponsorship and commitment’ as a key factor in why Six Sigma projects fall short of expectations.** Fifty-eight percent blamed lack of buy-in from front line managers and employees for implementing and sustaining results on Six Sigma project solutions.

When there is a lack of commitment and buy-in from management, project selection is at risk of failing to address critical business needs.

If projects selected for improvement are not considered business priorities, managers will not engage and projects will not get the attention, resources and commitment they need to be successful.

A common symptom of the problem is the tendency to set annual project completion targets too high. A consequence of setting over ambitious targets is that teams are more likely to select a large number of small projects that deliver modest financial savings, Instead of tackling deep business issues that take longer to execute, but have the capacity to deliver significant bottom line results.

In the absence of big savings, management support is less likely to be sustained over time.

What is the cost of managers and process owners not buying-in to projects and failing to contribute their knowledge to Six Sigma projects? The answer is that cycle times will be longer and there is the strong possibility that bottom line results will be lower.

The old adage, “involve the people whose commitment you need in the decision making process and they will buy-in to the solution” still holds true. The more you need the commitment and energy of others, the more you need to involve them in decision making. People who have a stake in the project are much more likely to buy-in and provide needed resources, whether its time, money, people or personal sponsorship. The process progressively involves the internal and external stakeholders in thinking about and planning the change, so there is broad ownership.

Getting Buy-in

The Stakeholder Analysis is the first step to developing an understanding of who will be critical to your success, how you will win their commitment, what interests you will need to serve and what resources and authority you will need to attract in order to efficiently and effectively implement the project, particularly when organizational goals are aligned with Six Sigma projects.

With the foresight gained from your strategic stakeholder plan, effective management engagement starts by involving key leaders in selecting high value projects, establishing the scope of these projects and who should be on the project team. Managers involved at this level are more likely to commit resources and less likely to delay decisions or withhold resources during the course of the project.

Similarly, process owners are much more likely to contribute time and effort to the project when their interests and needs have been met by the team. Include process owners in your Stakeholder Analysis, and try to identify some early “wins” to sustain their interest throughout the project.

Time is often the most difficult commodity to acquire from the leadership team. So it helps to keep planning meetings as brief as possible. Match meeting duration to your managers typical 30/60 minute time slots. To make the hour as productive as possible, try keeping to a tight agenda. Maintain focus on the objectives of the meeting.

Discussion is valuable at meetings but lengthy debates are often unproductive and simply a stage for time wasters. Consider introducing a structured method to process agenda items that encourages discussion but limits time consuming debate.

Also consider what benefits might flow from packaging your meeting methodology into an easy-to-follow process containing your agenda topics, questions, participant thinking prompts and decision points, so that you can focus on achieving your meeting objectives and not be constrained by the meeting process. Consider using tools that accelerate decision making e.g. voting, ranking, prioritizing, action planning. These tools and techniques are regularly being used in process improvement projects. Typically a one day workshop can be completed in half a day.

Leadership Shortfalls

Effective teamwork is a critical component of all Six Sigma projects. Unless teams are equipped with the necessary leadership, skills, attitudes, focus, alignment and motivation they are unlikely to succeed.

It only takes a few problems to create a dysfunctional team incapable of achieving a successful project outcome. Poor team dynamics is the major cause of dysfunction which may include:

- **Refusal to identify a leader.** Team members fail to accept the authority of the appointed Black Belt or Green Belt. In the absence of leadership the team will be rudderless and performance will be negatively affected.
- **Failure to establish roles and responsibilities.** This area includes skills and individual expertise. When there are no clear roles, effort is likely to be wasted or duplicated and the skills necessary to complete the project may be absent from the team.
- **Absence of goals/objectives to guide the project.** The old saying holds true, “If you do not know where you are going, you are never going to get there”.

- **Members have no understanding of how they are going to work together as a team.** Without some team building activity teams will lack cohesion, trust, discipline and the motivation to excel.
- **Failure to use quality tools.** The absence of tools to implement the DMAIC methodology can lengthen the project cycle time and reduce team productivity.

To help teams become more effective:

- **Focus team effort on achieving business results.** This creates a common purpose and context for decision making. A useful hierarchy is to establish project team goals, roles, procedures and relationships during the first team meeting.
- **Articulate and enforce "a few team rules".** This creates the necessary cohesion and fosters goal-directed collaboration in strategic and creative thinking, meeting management and teamwork itself. Review the rules periodically to encourage achievement of higher standards. Benchmark against the highest performing teams.
- **Create higher standards for idea generation, prioritization and action planning.** This ensures that more information is considered and potential consequences are anticipated. Decision making improves when team members are motivated to create superior ideas. Better project outcomes result.
- **Encourage personal accountability.** Team members will perform their assigned roles more effectively and provide value-adding contributions when they understand they are personally accountable for project outcomes.
- **Use a structured methodology.** Thirty-three percent of survey respondents blamed "lack of a structured methodology" for short falls in Six Sigma projects. New programs that integrate online collaboration with a structured Six Sigma methodology have the capacity to accelerate project cycle time and contribute to management buy-in. High performing teams with a systematic, structured methodology and the right collaboration tools can reduce project cycle time by as much as 92%.

These integrated tools and processes also provide leadership support to Belts who are required to demonstrate high levels of competence in three diverse areas - statistical analysis, team and stakeholder management and meeting facilitation – all of which require different skill sets and increase the complexity of facilitating Six Sigma facilitation projects.

Armed with a structured, collaborative methodology and online tools such as meeting agenda guides, statistical tools, a facilitation "script" and a roadmap increases productivity, decreases leadership complexity and increases the potential for more successful projects, delivered on time and on budget.

Results in less than half the time

While information technology pervades almost every sphere of business and delivers countless productivity and cost benefits, it is surprising that there is so little high tech is used in meetings.

Ask anyone who regularly attends meetings and they will say that meetings are a necessary evil, but they waste time, lack focus, few decisions are made and discussion is often dominated by a few opinionated people.

The time it takes a project team to work serially through a whiteboard or sticky-label session cannot match the productivity of collaborative software tools that reduce project time by up to 92% (IBM Research).

PC-based meeting tools are designed to facilitate effective teamwork and collaborative decision-making in meetings, workshops and conferences and can be used in face-to-face, distributed or a combination of the two modes – either synchronously or asynchronously.

Imagine rapid problem solving in a shared space. Everyone is able to instantly add-value to other ideas. All participate. Decision support tools move ideas through a flexible process including categorizing, ranking, action planning and reporting.

Some of the available tools are customized to the Six Sigma methodology to further accelerate projects and gain consistency across all projects. These tools also provide action learning environments to accelerate new Belt training and a “corporate memory” for lessons learned from projects. Buy-in is enhanced because more stakeholders can be involved in decision making; everyone has their say and no one can dominate meetings.

Working with Distributed Teams

Managing distributed teams may become the single biggest challenge in Six Sigma projects. The increasing need to manage team efforts in different locations and time zones and across organizational boundaries is amplifying the complexity of project execution.

Six Sigma projects already require high levels of group problem-solving, interpersonal communication and leadership. However, it's a fact that while dispersed teams require more management and communication, and they often get less.

Managing cross cultural issues

Managing a multicultural, trans-global project team presents specific challenges to team leaders. There are cross-cultural issues which discourage members from contributing their knowledge during virtual meetings, particularly where Belts are relying on local skills and knowledge of team members to identify process improvements. In the absence of good information, outcomes will be compromised.

Conference calls are not enough

Teleconferencing meetings are another major headache. Survey results show that in over 65% of teleconferences, members multitask, often replying to emails rather than contributing to a brainstorming or problem analysis discussions.

Too many balls in the air

Some Belts focus on how to make the people on the team “fit” together with the right skill mix and fail to create the conditions that challenge the team to reach higher levels of performance, better decisions and project outcomes.

Conversely, insufficient emphasis on rapport building and team members fail to bond, trust is not established and conflict situations arise, deflecting the teams' focus on achieving results.

Perhaps no other factor is as critical to a dispersed team's long-term success as a good start-up.

Maximizing distributed team performance

Maximizing distributed team performance also requires increased team collaboration and communication.

It is harder to build a high performing distributed team than a co-located team, yet team effectiveness is vital to achieving project success.

Team building, at the outset, helps to establish member roles, enables trust, and helps to create a team language for more effective communication. It is at this stage where team

goals are established and individual team members determine whether their personal agendas align with the team's.

An effective start up should get the team through the Forming stage of team development, and eliminate the high degree of uncertainty members feel about the group's purpose, structure and leadership. Start up should include:

- Clear expectations of the lead
- Mission statement and team goals
- Shared view of what the project should look like
- Clarity about each person's role in the completion of the project
- Team norms including metrics
- Adequate time commitments from each member
- Agreed upon norms around communication
- Mix of synchronous and asynchronous communication

In the Storming stage, there may be team conflict around issues such as leadership and loss of individual control which need to be addressed. In the Norming stage members develop strong relationships and cohesiveness. They share a common set of expectations and demonstrate cohesive group behaviour. When teams enter the Performing stage, they are fully functional and focused on achieving the objectives of the project. Teams are dynamic entities and subject to problems and issues requiring leadership and understanding.

Summary

The difference between a successful project and one that fails to meet expectations has more to do with people and how they work together than with quantitative analysis, important as it is. Tools and structured processes can make the difference between a good and excellent project.

About the author: Anne Hudson is co-CEO of Grouputer Solutions and co-inventor of the Grouputer patented integrated web conferencing/GDSS technology. She holds a masters degree in management and has over 18 years experience in the development and application of process automation to complex meeting methodologies. She can be reached at anne.hudson@grouputer.com

Thank you for taking the time to read this White Paper. If you would like more information about on-demand collaborative programs for Six Sigma, please visit www.grouputer.com