

Why Define?

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Like morning leads the day, a well defined well scoped six sigma project is more likely to be completed and lead to savings. The project that has directly started at the Measure and Analyze phase has the potential to be ditched as investigation of the current problem may open a can of worms (not literally) which would divert attention from the original goal. In the real world, driven by day to day pains and need for instant fixes, lots of projects will commence with the Measurement and analysis and Improve pooled together in one giant step. This is great when the X's (inputs) are small in number and their impacts on the Y (output /outputs) is clearly known. But how often is that the case?? More often then not a significant amount of head scratching is done before one can unveil the right X's (inputs) and have a clear understanding of their impacts on the Y (outputs). I wanted to write about is the importance of Define in the DMAIC model of Six Sigma .

The Define phase consists of a lot of qualitative tools like project charter, problem statement, flow mapping, CTX charts etc... Why are they important? Because they help identify and nail down

1. What problem we are trying to address (Houston, we have a problem!)
2. Who are the team members? (The short straw pickers!)
3. What is the scope? (Let's not try to boil the ocean!)
4. What is the current state? (We have always done it this way!)
5. What is the dollar equivalent benefit of the project? (it is always about the money !)
6. Why are we doing it? (The money that is being spent because we are miles away from our target!)
7. What is our goal ? (the utopic perfect world)

As we are all humans and we tend to have miscommunications , it is important to answer all of the above questions and have them down on a piece of paper, pdf file , .doc, .ppt , hey whatever makes you happy to have a “goto” document when we have those questions on why are we doing what we are doing ? This also helps build consensus about our current state , our desired future state and the goals.

In the Define phase we also have discoveries which we never thought existed which typically come in the process flow mapping and value stream mapping tools. Why do we have discoveries? Because in the day to day running of operations we are focused on getting the job done, we do not necessarily stop and analyze why are we doing it this way. The discoveries that we have explain some of the drivers of variation and non value added work.

In the multi roles, that an employee has to play at work it is hard to remember every minute detail .Define phase also acts as a refresher to all of the team members about the process and sometime this review process, causes team member to look at the process with a fresh pair of eyes .

Therefore to conclude, always try and use the Define tools as they can enable to build consensus, enabler for crystal clear two way communication, enabler for discoveries and also to stop and take a fresh look. . This will help keep the eyes on the ball, and help complete projects and translate completed projects into good bottom line savings for the organization. When you are trying to eat a elephant, you have to eat it piece by piece, which is why scoping is very critical for project success.