Have a Six Sigma Mentality

Every project manager shares the same basic goal: they want to streamline workflow and eliminate unnecessary or repetitive tasks in order to plan and execute projects as efficiently as possible. However, project managers can choose from several methodologies to get there.

There are two schools of thought dominate project management philosophy: the Lean method and the Six Sigma approach.

The Lean method stresses the importance of reducing all forms of waste.

Six Sigma is a data-driven, tried-and-true project management process.

The statistical representation of Six Sigma describes quantitatively how a process is performing.

To achieve Six Sigma, a process must not produce more than 3.4 defects per million opportunities.

A Six Sigma defect is defined as anything outside of customer specifications.

A Six Sigma opportunity is then the total quantity of chances for a defect.

The fundamental objective of the Six Sigma methodology is the implementation of a measurement-based strategy that focuses on process improvement and variation reduction through the application of Six Sigma improvement projects.

This is accomplished through the use of two Six Sigma sub-methodologies: DMAIC and DMADV.

The Six Sigma DMAIC process (define, measure, analyze, improve, control) is an improvement system for existing processes falling below specification and looking for incremental improvement.

The Six Sigma DMADV process (define, measure, analyze, design, verify) is an improvement system used to develop new processes or products at Six

Sigma quality levels. It can also be employed if a current process requires more than just incremental improvement.

Both Six Sigma processes are executed by Six Sigma Green Belts and Six Sigma Black Belts, and are overseen by Six Sigma Master Black Belts.

According to the Six Sigma Academy, Black Belts save companies approximately $230,000 per project and can complete four to six projects per year. (Given that the average Black Belt salary is $80,000 in the United States, that is a fantastic return on investment.)

General Electric, one of the most successful companies implementing Six Sigma, has estimated benefits on the order of $10 billion during the first five years of implementation. GE first began Six Sigma in 1995 after Motorola and Allied Signal blazed the Six Sigma trail. Since then, thousands of companies around the world have discovered the far reaching benefits of Six Sigma.

Lean Six Sigma principles

1. Focus on the customer

One of the oldest, yet most prudent, pieces of business advice holds true today. No matter what business you're in, you should always put customers first. Everything should revolve around your customers and their needs. After all, without customers, where would your organization be?

Before you start making any drastic or even minor changes, establish the level of quality or requirements that you have promised your customers. Every decision you make should bring your company closer to delivering maximum value.

2. Figure out your value stream

You need to see the current state of your process before you can move forward and make improvements. Identifying value stream is indisputably what makes Lean Six Sigma principles

so effective. It's how businesses visualize all of the steps in a given process and highlight areas of waste.

How do a few pieces of plastic and glass on an assembly line ultimately become a 4K television? A value stream map showcases every single step, including purchasing parts, assembling them (and checking for quality assurance), and distributing the finished product. From there, your company would determine which steps add value and which do not (and can, therefore, be removed from the process).

Want to create your own value stream map? Read this blog post if you'd like us to walk you through the entire process, or get started right away with the value stream map template below.

Value Stream Map Template (Click on image to modify this template)

3. Take out the trash

Once you have put together your current value stream, you can identify the problems with your workflow and solve them. Remove any non-value-added activities or opportunities for defects.

On your value stream map, avoid highlighting areas that are working fluidly. True, it's important to showcase successes and wins for employee morale and building company culture. However, Lean Six Sigma methodology is about finding where problems arise, fixing them, and preventing future occurrences.

If your value stream map doesn't clarify exactly where the problem lies, you can use several other diagrams to work through potential root causes of the issue. Cause-and-effect diagrams, also known as fishbone diagrams for their layout, can help you identify problems within different areas of your business. For example, service industries typically look at the four p's—policies, procedures, people, and the plant/technology—to find potential causes.

Cause-and-Effect Diagram Template (Click on image to modify online)

If you want to involve your team, you can also brainstorm issues with an affinity diagram.

4. Keep the ball rolling

The law of inertia states that an object at rest or moving at a constant speed will remain at rest or keep moving, unless it is acted upon by an external force. The same applies to your organization: nothing will change until change is enacted.

Workers will keep performing (or not performing) the same tasks until management decides otherwise. The onus is on the business to effectively, clearly communicate new standards and practices. Be sure each employee receives training and feedback. Otherwise, why expect the problem to change?

You can use Lucidchart to create a simple process mapthat clearly shows your employees what has

changed about their workflow (add swimlanes to delineate responsibilities by team or employee). Customize this process map template with your own workflow.

Lean Six Sigma Process Map (Click on image to modify this template)

5. Create a culture of change and flexibility

As you can tell from the other principles we've discussed, Lean Six Sigma requires a lot of change. You need to welcome change and encourage your employees to accept change as well. Put yourself in the shoes of your employees—hearing that one's job has been automated or certain duties have been removed could cause them to panic. However, you can dispel fears by explaining the benefits of the change and show employees how you have made their work more impactful.

As part of this cultural shift, your company should always look for new ways to streamline the process and remove waste. Keep your eye on the data,

examine your bottom line, and adjust your processes where necessary.

Lean Six Sigma methodology captures the best of both Six Sigma and Lean methods of project management. If you decide to follow this methodology, follow the Lean Six Sigma principles and optimize process improvement once and for all.