

Process Improvement Made Easy: The Six Sigma Process Improvement Method Explained

By Lyndsay Swinton

What is Six Sigma process improvement? Something to do with eliminating defects? Right so far. Is it a continuous process improvement methodology? Yes, it's a disciplined approach to problem solving and continuous process improvement. Or is it just a load of really hard statistics? Well, there is some statistics involved but it's not that bad! Here is the Six Sigma Process Improvement Method explained.

Stage 1 – Define

What's the problem, why is it important, who's going to solve it? All of these questions need answered up front, using a host of tools and templates such as "project charters" and "critical to quality" diagrams. The more work done defining the problem, the more likely the problem will be successfully resolved.

Stage 2 – Measure

If you don't know the process or how it's currently performing, how will you know you've fixed it? The measure phase is about understanding and quantifying the current reality, by using tools such as process mapping, collecting and validating data. If it moves, measure it!

Stage 3 – Analyze

Now we get serious about flushing out the root cause of the problem. All sorts of statistical tests are done to determine which is the rotten apple spoiling the barrel. This is the point at which a highly trained Six Sigma "Black Belt" gets busy, as they perform the complicated number crunching. Mere mortals on the project team get involved in identifying non value adding steps in the process and making sure analysis paralysis does not creep in.

Stage 4 – Improve

You've found the rotten apples, now it's time to throw them out. The improve phase is about eliminating the root cause of the problem and/or implementing a solution that will flag early if the process is on a slippery slope to defect land.

Stage 5 – Control

The control phase is about getting the process back to business as usual. The project team hands over responsibility to the people in charge of the everyday process, with the added benefit of having prevented the problem from occurring again, or giving them the tools to monitor the process and nip problems in the bud before they grow. The project charter is reviewed, to ensure all project charter objectives have been met, such as cost reductions and quality improvements. And then it's time to party, and let the business know about the successful project.

There are many manufacturing companies successfully using Six Sigma process improvement methodology, such as General Electric and Motorola, and some service industries such as American Express. The process, tools and techniques are similar, so regardless of industry, you now know a bit more than before about Six Sigma process improvement!

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