

The role of the Six Sigma deployment leader

Training Belts and doing projects are not the only ingredients in the recipe for a successful Six Sigma deployment. As a matter of fact, there is no "magic recipe" or "silver bullet" — too many failed deployments are testimony to this. In the end, the only common factor is the ability of the deployment leader to design a custom fit deployment which is strategically aligned to the organisation, and to execute on the deployment plan.

SO what are the key responsibilities in the role of the deployment leader?

Designing the deployment

There really is no such thing as a "typical" deployment. Even though the Belts are always trained the same, each deployment is different. Deployments do not fail because the Belts did not know how to do the statistical analysis! The difference is in the infrastructure with which the Belts are supported, and the deployment leader is responsible to lead a design team to design such a support infrastructure. In the design, several critical variables must be addressed to ensure that a sustainable programme, which will deliver ongoing results without the dependency on consultants, will be in place.

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To design a deployment, the deployment leader must be sensitive towards the organisation's culture and operating environment. As each organisational culture is unique, a cut-copy-and-paste approach does not work. Similarly, benchmarking other deployments without comprehending the factors that enabled such deployments to succeed, is setting oneself up for failure. Copying job descriptions, setting training targets and requiring a certain number of projects per year will not replicate results. The deployment leader needs to be cognizant of the specific needs of the organisation and should customise the deployment accordingly, while keeping the basics intact.

Strategic alignment

Six Sigma projects should always involve teams of people, not just the Belts. These teams are resources that belong to the rest of the organisation. If a deployment leader expects the organisation's support,

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the deployment has to be viewed as supporting the strategic goals and objectives of the organisation. During the initial phases of the deployment, such alignment can be achieved through the careful selection of the initial/training projects.

Unfortunately, a democratic approach does not work here. The deployment leader must have a good understanding of the overall value chain of the organisation and guard against localised improvement projects that are disconnected from the strategic objectives of the overall organisation. Although a wide participation in the deployment is desirable, this should not lead to the quality of projects being sacrificed for quantity of projects. The bottom-line impact of a few hand-picked projects is far more important than a large number of projects being completed without showing results. However, one should be careful not to promise the "solution to world hunger" with the initial project selection.

The deployment leader must also ensure that the executive sponsors understand their role in the deployment. They (the executive sponsors) are not only responsible for creating the vision of the

deployment — they create the environment within the organisation that promotes the use of Six Sigma tools and methods. In order to facilitate this, the deployment leader must develop a holistic communication plan around Six Sigma, utilising the executive sponsors as key elements in the plan. It is recommended that the deployment leader develop an "elevator speech" which encompasses what Six Sigma is and why it's being done. The "elevator speech" should be delivered to the executives, and they could also be asked to talk about the deployment at key employee awareness meetings.

Lastly, the deployment leader must develop an overarching change management plan to shorten the duration of the change and minimise the severity of the impact on the organisation. Nothing guarantees the climb to productivity other than the skill sets of the deployment leader and that person's ability to build and execute such a comprehensive change management plan.

Removing roadblocks

Deployment leaders should remove roadblocks. Senior managers generally have been rewarded for putting out fires rather than systematically improving processes. This could put a Belt between a rock and a hard place — between the politics of the organisation and the projects required to make the dramatic process improvement. And, politics and projects just do not mix.

Deployment leaders need to be in a position to defuse any issues that may arise between a Belt and another person in the organisation. They are the fallback position for a Belt, particularly if the issue is with someone with a higher formal position in the company. The return comes from allowing Belts the freedom to focus on the problem, and not engage in some territorial dispute that they lose based on the formal distribution of power.

A deployment leader who expects that project teams will manage on their own, is



doomed to failure. A deployment leader must therefore be involved in formal and informal project reviews and use the data from project tracking software as a management tool to flag events that are different to what occurs in a normal project. A leader, as opposed to a manager, can use the data to formulate questions during a review to identify roadblocks and/or problem areas on projects, and focus on removing such obstacles.

Day-to-day management and execution

Apart from all the above tasks, the deployment leader is also responsible for the day-to-day management of the deployment throughout the entire organisation, and should report directly to an executive steering committee or to a senior executive. The deployment leader is also responsible for managing the delivery of the training into the organisation and the career development and performance management of the Black Belts and Master Black Belts in the programme.

The deployment leader must execute on the deployment plan (as decided upon in the design phase), and put the infrastructure and systems in place to support the programme. Just as Black Belts use data to analyse and deliver results, deployment leaders should develop systems to generate data that they can use to manage the pipeline of ideas, the execution of projects and the performance of the Belts.

Six Sigma projects do differ, and it is

necessary to quantify and analyse those differences in order to manage the results of a deployment. Success will depend heavily on how well a deployment leader understands the types of projects being selected and how well he ensures that the projects are moving along at a reasonable pace. In order to keep Black Belts energised, an astute deployment leader will balance the workload of Black Belts between longer term, slow moving projects and fast, quick-hit type projects. The deployment leader must also optimise the utilisation of resources by having a queue of projects waiting for Belts to complete.

The same project tracking software should also be used to manage the performance of the Belts by analysing the project data per Belt by project category and by project phase. By comparing individual Belt performance to the database of projects, Belts who have a particular talent for certain types of projects can be identified. Belts can therefore be used where they perform best, and development opportunities can be identified to strengthen their overall skill set.

Ownership transfer

As the organisation matures, and the effectiveness of the Belts increases, the deployment will require less management and more leadership. At this point, the deployment leader should allow control to shift to the places where there is accountability, and simultaneously monitor the organisation for compliance. The successful

transfer of ownership is the last, but most probably the most important deliverable for a successful deployment leader.

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Given all these responsibilities and tasks, it is hopefully clear that any organisation thinking of deploying Six Sigma should think carefully about the selection of their deployment leader. A successful Black Belt or Master Black Belt from another organisation will not necessarily make a successful deployment leader within your own organisation. However, having the honour of leading a deployment remains one of the most rewarding and challenging roles in any Six Sigma project.

For more information, please contact

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