

Failure to Launch?

The Top Five Reasons Why Lean and Six Sigma Initiatives Fail

August 24, 2014

This is the first installment of a series of five papers that will run between now and the end of 2014 on why Lean and Six Sigma initiatives fail with recommendations about what to do about them. The number one reason will be available in December!

The rankings of the reasons are based on how critically indispensable to success that they are. If, for example, the reason centers around a component that is critical, but that the leader can compensate for during the program it receives a lower ranking than a truly indispensable reason that has no alternative. You will have to wait until the December installment to see that one 😊.

Here is the August installment –

REASON #5 = WRONG PROJECTS.

In December, once you will have seen all five top reasons for failure, you will see that this one is easily avoided if the first four are in place – that's why it is number five. However, it is nonetheless a really important contributor to failed initiatives. To understand what could be wrong about a project, it is important to consider both the role and objective of projects in implementing Lean and Six Sigma and what is practical and expedient.

The objectives of the right projects are to:

1. Provide an opportunity for the project manager to put into practice the Lean and Six Sigma methods
2. Promote the implementation by confirming the benefit for the Lean or Six Sigma project manager to solidify his or her commitment to the methodologies and demonstrate the benefit for others critical to the ultimate success of the implementation
3. Lay the foundations for the success of the initiative – develop processes for the process management via metrics, assure the skills and capabilities required to effectively apply methods, set the tone for the cultural change.

How do the selection of projects fail to meet these objectives, or more importantly what can one do to assure that they are adequately fulfilled.

Objective 1 – Opportunity to Apply the Tools

If the organization is novice in its initiative and there is little or weak external support and coaching, it's almost the proverbial chicken and egg thing. The initiative needs projects that provide ample opportunities to practice the methods but there is no one in the organization that understands the methods, so no one knows how to recognize what candidate projects provide those opportunities. This is the logical role of external coaches who are essentially renting you their knowledge and experience in identifying projects that do provide ample opportunity to practice the methods. So – the best assurance you can provide to avoid this pitfall is to make sure you have the guidance of good internal or external resource to help identify the projects that do provide the opportunity to discover cause and effect using the Six Sigma or Lean tools the project manager will learn in his or her workshops. Ask yourself if the improvement opportunity that is the focus of the project has a known resolution or if, while there may be some good conjecture about the best solutions, it is a safe bet that there is a lot of unknowns and that those unknowns, once the Six Sigma or Lean tools shed light on them could lead to different solutions. Even if they would lead to the solutions one originally surmised may have been the right solution from the beginning, if the project provides the opportunity to explore multiple opportunities and provide data based validation of the best solution, the project will have served the objective of practicing the methods.

Objective 2 – Promotion of the Benefits of the Methodologies

There are two parts here. First the project should be about an opportunity the organization really cares about. If they don't the project manager won't realize the fulfillment associated with a real contribution to the organization's well-being and others, especially skeptics, will use it to strengthen their arguments of why it isn't worth the investment in their time. Assuring the value of the project starts by choosing something that is squarely aligned to the organization's strategy and key tactics. In fact, ideally, it should be so important that at least some key aspect of the organization's strategy should depend on the

success of the chosen project. That may seem a little gutsy the first time around but it also demonstrates management's commitment and value for implementation of the new Lean and Six Sigma disciplines – another important success factor in successful initiatives. Once the alignment with strategy is established, the project manager will define the project and the business case. Management review and sign-off on the project and the business case should be a pre-requisite for launching the project.

Objective 3 – Laying the Foundation

This is probably less obvious than the first two objectives but the thinking about the initiative should be long-term as well as short-term. The long-term implications of the project should include how it helps the organization build on the success to make the next projects or ongoing processes that result from the project work more effectively. As an example, the project may result in new processes that heretofore were missing and therefore rendering it difficult or impossible to do even the basic things that would be necessary to successfully take on other projects. An area where this happens frequently is for organizations that have little clearly defined and documented processes or where the processes are defined but there aren't any systems to collect metrics on the performance of the process or provide insights into the potential factors affecting the critical process outcomes and the infrastructure to collect such metrics is weak or non-existent. Choose projects that will rely on metrics that the project manager can reasonably expect to be able to collect or develop practical systems that will allow the collection of data in the span of the time he or she expects the project to take to complete. The project should leave the processes it was associated with capable to take on new projects after completion of the first one by leaving in place a robust infrastructure to enable success on future related projects.

While those three objectives are pretty logical once take time to reflect a little on how to choose a project, there are others considerations that may less evident to organizations with no experience in the implementation of Lean and Six Sigma strategy. Those are the practical considerations of project characteristics that account for the pace of the learning process, the hierarchy of learning order, the time one can practically invest in running the project and the limits on the duration of the project. Here are some guidelines.

1. Project managers should be able to control the collection of data and implementation of solutions. There is nothing more frustrating for a project manager trying to earn her certification than doing a beautiful project with a beautiful solution that no one will allow her to implement.
2. Typical projects will require a span of about three to six months. This will of course depend on the complexity of the project. You can expect, for example, that the complexity to increase as one goes from Green Belt to Black Belt. It also will typically require a minimum of a three-month duration since the project manager will also be learning the methodologies as he as she or he is applying them. The hierarchy of learning may also mean that the Green Belt or Black Belt candidate doesn't have all of the tools at his or her disposal in the same order as when the project would necessarily benefit most from them. A candidate will certainly need and be able to confirm a good project definition early in the process. They will typically be able to apply some of the soft tools early as well. Tools like Ishikawa Fishbone diagrams, five whys, process flow charts, value stream analysis and maybe Pareto charts of historical data are tools the beginning candidate will apply early. However, a statistically designed experiment may provide very powerful insights early on but the required accumulation of knowledge about statistical knowledge required to apply designed experiments probably won't come until the end of the Green Belt or beginning of Black Belt training. We are NWCPE typically give Black Belt candidates up to six months after the initiation of their first workshop to complete their projects.
3. Availability and commitment of Six Sigma and Lean coaches and Champions to review and pass on each phase of the Define, Measure, Analyze, Improve and Control phases. The project manager needs this feedback. He or she is very close to the details plus still learning. They will need the perspective of the champion to assure it is still properly aligned with organization strategy and is still valued. They will often need to guidance of a qualified coach on the correct use of tools or which tools next and how to interpret the results and analyses. The DMAIC phase



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reviews and informal reviews or coaching in between will go a long toward assure the timely completion of a highly values and therefore successful project.

That's what we have for you this time. Projects are key but good projects alone aren't all you need. Look for the September installment for reason number four.

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