Six Sigma and Diversity

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"Diversity: the art of thinking independently together"
Malcolm Stevenson Forbes (1880-1954)

Six Sigma enables organisations to succeed in the demanding and fast changing environment we face in the 21st century. Much of the power of Six Sigma derives from the style of management it provides, and its ability to mobilise and align our most important asset – our people.

Initiative, innovation and creativity are becoming increasingly important differentiators that are beginning to separate the winners from the losers. This is true not only in marketing and product development but also throughout the entire organisation. Everyone is able to make a contribution - if they are given the opportunity.

Six Sigma provides us with the focus and tools necessary to unlock the potential within our organisation, and in the years to come Six Sigma will become the major element in our knowledge management programmes as we strive to retain and share our best practice. "Ideas on Demand" is rapidly becoming the name of the game.

Our prospects of rising above the rest will be greatly influenced by our ability to realise the potential that Diversity can provide. Diversity works on the premise that we are all unique, special, and different and, more importantly, that these differences represent significant added value to the organisation. The more able we are to leverage the benefits arising from these differences the more effective we will be.

A commitment to Diversity requires an effective process of self-examination. Whilst it is important to learn about other individuals and groups, Diversity requires us to assess our personal values and to assess how they affect our behaviours (for better or worse!). What we value will determine our attitudes, which in turn affect how we interact (or behave) with the people around us. Therefore to be effective, and to demonstrate the right behaviours we need to be in tune with our own values.

Much has been said about Six Sigma's ability to transform the culture of an organisation (customer focus, data driven decision making etc.) In practical terms – what does this imply, and how do we go about it? We need to consider the origins of culture.

Culture develops out of the collective behaviours of individuals or groups. In turn these behaviours arise from our attitudes and values. Therefore, if we seek to change the culture of the organisation we must first be aware of the values at play.
Diversity arises from this complex interlocking mosaic of cultures and values. Cultures are, of course, not only national in character. They can be regional, affected by our upbringing, age, social or professional status, religion, etc. Being "minority" or "majority" in a larger culture will also affect culture and values - our personal perspective on the world around us.

To be effective and to gain the maximum advantage from our use of Six Sigma we need to be aware of how difference, or the absence of difference, affects the way we manage our processes, design products and services, market them, or deal with questions of customer satisfaction.

Diversity requires us to learn how to include the range of differences in our organisation. Having first looked internally, we need then to extend beyond our own boundaries and consider the differences within our customers and suppliers.

To be able to use Diversity to our individual and collective advantage, we must understand and align our values such that we can be more effective personally, professionally, and organisationally. It is not a question of being "right" and "wrong", whilst we will retain our own individual values we need to agree on the approach that is most effective for our organisation as a whole. Six Sigma, and the objectivity it implies, can provide the catalyst.

However, the Six Sigma practitioner is likely to be disappointed if he or she expects to find a lot of data in the field of Diversity. This is an Art rather than a Science. It is of course highly subjective as we are dealing with people and their emotions. However, if Six Sigma is to gain universal acceptance, and become a permanent feature of the organisation, it is essential that Six Sigma is used to harness the power of Diversity and the spectrum of perspectives, ideas and opportunities it implies.

Diversity is about understanding and leveraging the differences contained in our organisation so a good place to start would be to consider whether the mix of resources contained in our Six Sigma infrastructure properly reflects the Diversity of our organisation as a whole.
Diversity implies building a strong sense of community, in which individuals respect and appreciate the values, culture, and ideas of others. This creates a positive and productive environment, which is conducive to new ideas and change. As any experienced Black Belt will tell you, change management is the most difficult part of the assignment; Diversity can make an importance difference.

So how to move forward? Communicating our commitment to Diversity is a good place to start, however, "walking the talk", or demonstrating the right behaviours, will make the real difference over time. For example ensuring that our criteria for Belt & Team selection properly represents the Diversity of the organisation, ensuring that we adopt an inclusive approach to tasks such as project selection and scoping, recognising and celebrating the differences in the organisation etc.

We hear much of the 4-sigma "wall" which can only be overcome through the use of Design for Six Sigma. This may or may not be the case, but my personal experience would suggest that the surest way of maintaining the momentum of our Six Sigma journey is to ensure that we involve, excite, motive and utilise the human capital of our organisation. A strong commitment to Diversity and the richness of experience that this implies is an opportunity that we cannot afford to overlook.

"What we need to do is learn to work in the system, by which I mean that everybody, every team, every platform, every division, every component is there, not for individual competitive profit or recognition, but for contribution to the system as a whole on a win-win basis"
W. Edwards Deming (1900-1993).