



Developing BBs and MBBs: Three Questions to Answer

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So your Lean Six Sigma initiative is looking good. Training is moving along, project results are coming in, momentum is building. Ah, the sweet smell of success.

But before you get too comfortable, here is something for deployment leaders, and others in positions of leadership, to reflect on: Are you doing all you can to help your Black Belts and Master Black Belts succeed?

Specifically, consider these three questions. Are you:

1. Paying enough attention to the development of soft skills?
2. Maximizing training effectiveness by following the experiential learning cycle?
3. Treating Lean Six Sigma training as leadership development?

If not, you may be wasting some of your organization's key assets.

Paying Attention to Soft Skills

Do you think of soft skills as important in the human resources department, but irrelevant for those involved in Lean Six Sigma? A recent study by iSixSigma Magazine ("The Hard Truth About Soft Skills," January/February 2008) could be an eye-opener.

The study examined the role of soft skills, such as communication, the ability to motivate, relationship building, change management and team leadership, in the success of Six Sigma. Among the findings published in the article:

- By a wide margin, the 900-plus recipients considered the ability to communicate to be the most important of all Black Belt skills.
- Ninety-seven percent and 99 percent of respondents said that soft skills were equally or more important than technical skills to the success of Black Belts and Master Black Belts, respectively.
- Soft skills were considered by 83 percent of respondents to be equally or more difficult to learn than technical skills.
- Organizations providing soft skills training to Belts reported a higher level of initiative success than those that do not provide soft skills training.

If you are deeply involved in Lean Six Sigma, these findings probably resonate with you. They also align with the information gathered through years of experience and research in the study of leadership. Technical skills alone cannot guarantee success when getting people to behave differently is one of your goals – as is the case in Lean Six Sigma.

So what are companies doing about this? According to the study, 87 percent of respondents said that their company's Black Belt training included some form of soft skills development. Yet only 29 percent of responding companies devoted more than 20 percent of their training time to soft skills. (The article does not specify which soft skills are included in the training.)

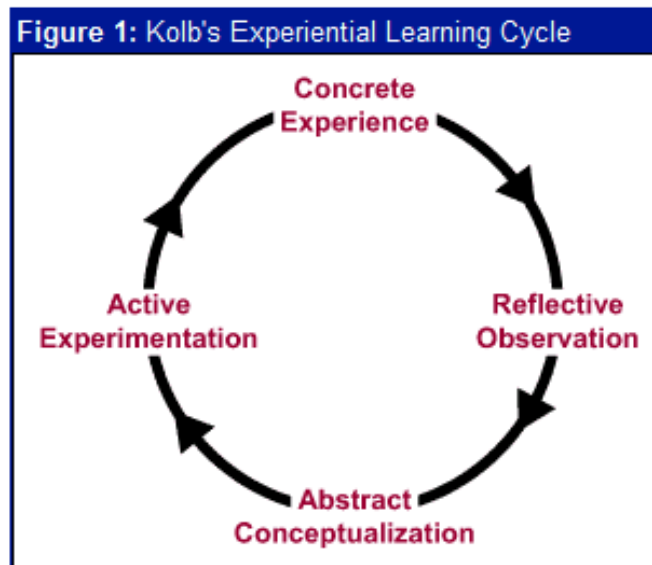
If soft skills are so important and difficult to learn – a reasonable conclusion from the study – then the percentage of training time devoted to these skills does not seem to match the size of the challenge or opportunity.

Ask yourself: Is the amount of time you're spending on soft skills training for Black Belts and Master Black Belts commensurate with the contribution these skills can make to Belt success? Are Belts getting the right kind of soft skills training?

Maximizing Training Effectiveness: The Experiential Learning Cycle

The experiential learning cycle, introduced in David Kolb's *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development* (Prentice-Hall, 1984), states that although we each have preferences for how we like to learn, we tend to learn best when we have a chance to:

- Relate learning to a personal experience (*concrete experience*).
- Reflect on our experience (*reflective observation*).
- Hear what experts say, understand theories and form conclusions (*abstract conceptualization*).
- Practice new behaviors, with guidance and coaching (*active experimentation*).





Many companies implementing Lean Six Sigma follow this model to an extent. They often:

- Ensure classroom training is interactive.
- Require Belts to do a project during training.
- Discuss projects during class.
- Provide Belts with coaching support during their first project(s).

Assuming that other necessary success factors are in place – such as good projects, the right Champions, and rewards that align with Lean Six Sigma goals – those companies likely are seeing good results. But could those results be better? Could companies do more to capitalize on the power of the experiential learning cycle?

The data suggests that the answer is “yes.” Most organizations do not pay sufficient attention to the element of active experimentation as it relates to soft skills.

Many organizations provide coaching to support Belts as they develop technical skills, yet few provide coaching on soft skills. According to the iSixSigma study, only 8 percent of respondents said that they provided anything other than classroom and/or computer-based instruction in delivering soft skills training. A portion of that 8 percent mentioned coaching as one of their techniques.

As anyone who has played a sport knows, developing and maintaining a skill takes practice, practice, practice... along with timely and specific feedback. The skills required in Lean Six Sigma are no different, which is why doing a project and getting coached are so critical. But if coaching is provided only for technical skills, how can Belts ensure that any soft skills they have managed to develop will not atrophy?

Ask Yourself: Are you attending to all elements of the experiential learning cycle for all the different types of skills Belts need to develop and maintain?

Lean Six Sigma Training as Leadership Development

If the only goal of training Belts was to ensure the success of the Lean Six Sigma initiative, there would already be a compelling case for focusing on their development. But in many companies, more is at stake.

Think of Lean Six Sigma as a specific example of a more general type of corporate initiative, and you will realize that many such initiatives have similar challenges and success factors. Similar initiatives may focus on operations excellence, enterprise systems, customer resource management, self-managed teams, mergers or innovation strategies. Think back to all the initiatives you have lived through and you may notice a common thread. Typically, these initiatives require people to: a) redirect resources (budget, attention, employees) to something new and unproven, and b) take a new and



different approach to doing their work. The skills required to make this kind of change happen successfully are similar across many different initiatives.

This suggests that skills Belts learn during the course of Lean Six Sigma training may help them become not only effective Black Belts and Master Black Belts, but also effective organizational leaders. Lean Six Sigma training can thus be a form of leadership development. Consider whether your company could benefit from having leaders whose approach incorporates:

- **Customer-focused thinking** – knowing the value of the voice of the customer (VOC), and measuring performance against customer-defined requirements.
- **Root-cause, data-based thinking** – identifying and dealing with root causes instead of symptoms; not wasting resources by asking people to chase “noise.”
- **Process thinking** – looking across functions and seeing processes the way customers experience them, and seeking solutions that work holistically.
- **Lean thinking** – seeing what adds value to the customer, and knowing how to reduce or eliminate unnecessary waste.
- **Metrics thinking** – knowing how to identify the critical few metrics that will help ensure that solved problems remain solved.

If you have focused properly on soft skills, you can add them to that list. For example:

- **Stakeholder thinking** – identifying, anticipating and managing stakeholder concerns in a way that generates buy-in and commitment to critical organizational initiatives.

GE recognized this potential years ago. Managers at that company who were looking to be promoted were required to have a certain level of Belt training, depending on the desired position. Eventually, a large percentage of GE’s leaders went through Belt training and incorporated those skills into their everyday approach to leading.

Ask Yourself: How is Belt training perceived in your organization? Is it seen as the means for accomplishing Lean Six Sigma-related projects *and* as a way to develop leaders of the future for a broader set of organizational challenges that require similar skills?



Making the Most of Your Belts

Black Belts and Master Black Belts are valuable assets to any organization, and should be treated and developed accordingly. Depending on your answers to the questions above, you may want to consider:

1. Helping your Belts develop the kinds of soft skills that are critical to success, and doing so in a way that aligns with the experiential learning cycle.
2. Treating your Belts as potential organizational leaders of the future, and Lean Six Sigma training as leadership development, while also developing a process for moving veteran Belts into key leadership positions.

No self-respecting Lean Six Sigma professional wants to create waste. Yet that is exactly what will happen if the potential of Black Belts and Master Black Belts is squandered by not giving them the right support and development.

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