A Crucial Strategy for the Success of Six Sigma Implementation

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Abstract: Communication can be a predictor of and inoculation against the success of any Six Sigma process. When the communication process breaks down, Six Sigma inevitably breaks down. And most often, communication fails during what we call “crucial conversations”—high-stakes disagreements that involve strong emotions and differing opinions. VitalSmarts researchers sought to identify a relatively small set of common, costly, and difficult to discuss problems, and to measure their impact on Six Sigma projects. The researchers at VitalSmarts found five common problems that spell the difference between success and failure of a Six Sigma project. These five problems demand special attention within Six Sigma deployments and they were encountered by more than 90 percent of the Black Belts in our sample. When left unresolved, these problems caused missed timelines, unachieved quality and savings goals, dissatisfied sponsors and process owners, and poor morale. When addressed and resolved, these problems were not major obstacles to Six Sigma success. However, fewer than 20 percent of the Black Belts surveyed did address and resolve them. Research by VitalSmarts also reveals that the problem is not that Six Sigma teams encounter problems; rather the problem is that they fail to openly discuss and effectively resolve a specific set of common issues using the skills and principles of crucial conversations.

Keywords: Six Sigma, cause and consequence analysis

1. Introduction

“As soon as we bumped into a policy issue I knew we were dead,” recounted one Black Belt. He continued, “Our Six Sigma team was primed and ready to analyze technical issues. They dived into the process-improvement parts of the project, but our sponsor was never really involved. He asked me to write most of the charter and he only attended our meetings when I hounded him. He never stayed on top of what we were doing. So, when the team discovered a disconnect that involved an important policy, I knew our sponsor would abandon ship. He doesn’t like to get involved in politics, and he doesn’t think our team should get involved either. I went to talk to him. I wanted to persuade him to take our recommendations to the policy committee, but I never got that far. I could tell the discussion was going nowhere, so I bailed. Now the team is just going through the motions.”

The experience of one Black Belt proves that communication can be a predictor of and inoculation against the success of the Six Sigma process. As illustrated, when the communication process breaks down, Six Sigma will inevitably break down.
Communication fails in two distinct ways. The first failure mode occurs in unintentional slips and errors such as not communicating across departments, confusion due to accents or bad handwriting, and misunderstandings due to different backgrounds or education.

The second failure mode occurs in what we call “crucial conversations.” These breakdowns are more intentional. They occur when a person has a concern, but instead of communicating the concern the person either clams up or blows up. We define crucial conversations as high-stakes disagreements that involve strong emotions or differing opinions. They often involve political or sensitive topics and delicate personal or professional relationships.

Focusing on the second failure mode, crucial conversations, we sought to identify a relatively small set of problems that were common, costly, and difficult to discuss. We then wanted to measure their impact on Six Sigma projects. What the Black Belt described above is a problem we define as an “AWOL Sponsor”—just one of five common problems that spell the difference between success and failure of a Six Sigma project.

To uncover the specific crucial conversations that manifest in Six Sigma projects and initiatives, the researchers at VitalSmarts conducted interviews and focus groups, and administered surveys in two separate studies to more than 900 senior executives, Six Sigma sponsors, Black Belts, process owners, and team members from a wide variety of industries. They also studied Six Sigma projects that ranged from small purchasing and inventory control projects to major R&D and intellectual property projects.

A leader in corporate training and organizational performance, VitalSmarts released their findings in a study titled, *Speak Up or Fail: Five Crucial Conversations for Six Sigma*. The study reveals that the concern is not that Six Sigma teams encounter problems—problems are unavoidable. Rather, the problem is that when teams do encounter obstacles, they fail to openly discuss and effectively resolve a specific set of common issues.

2. **The Five Most Crucial Problems**

Specifically, researchers discovered five problems that demand special attention within Six Sigma deployments. These five problems were encountered by more than 90 percent of the Black Belts in the sample. When left unresolved, these problems caused missed timelines, unachieved quality and savings goals, dissatisfied sponsors and process owners, and poor morale. When addressed and resolved, these problems were not major obstacles to Six Sigma success. However, fewer than 20 percent of the Black Belts surveyed did address and resolve them. The five problems include absent sponsors, powerful opponents, skirting, team failures, and stakeholder fear.

The following defines each problem and provides an example of how Black Belts commonly encounter these potentially derailing challenges.

2.1 **AWOL Executives and Sponsors**

To accomplish their goals, Black Belts and their teams need support from their sponsor as well as political clout. Perhaps they’ll need their sponsor’s leverage with a reluctant process owner or they’ll discover obstacles that involve policy issues beyond their charter.

The fact that Six Sigma teams need their sponsors’ assistance is not a problem. It’s only a problem if their sponsors fail to support them. Here is how a Black Belt describes an AWOL Sponsor.
“The project was to redesign a process used by most managers. Unfortunately, it only took a few managers to derail the project. When we faced resistance, we went to our sponsor. But often, we’d found the disgruntled managers had gotten to her first. Consequently, we were the ones who had to scale back. At some point it would have been better to just quit. Our sponsor went ahead and declared victory, but we all felt like losers. The project was scaled down to nothing.”

2.2 Powerful Opponents

Managers and process owners may feel their Six Sigma team has been forced upon them. They may believe the team encroaches on their authority or they may disagree with the approach the team is taking. In these cases, Six Sigma teams may begin to feel that the manager is an opponent to their cause. Consider the following example:

“Top management doesn’t see the value in my department. So when people are asked to be on our team, management lets them know they don’t have to work for the team if they don’t want to. Management actually threw one of my team members out of their lab. He went to measure what equipment they had, and he was physically removed from the lab. They have some issues.”

2.3 Skirting

Sometimes Black Belts limit their teams’ success by selecting projects that are peripheral, low-leverage, or safe. They skirt the tough or political, but potentially high-return, areas of the business, and instead focus on low-hanging fruit. One manager confesses to skirting projects with his team.

“I think we skirted around the true projects important to the company’s overall success and placed a few little safe things onto the list. It gave the appearance of effectively participating in the process. In truth we were demonstrating some passive resistance to going after the real issues. We weren’t drilling into certain sensitive parts of the business where we knew we weren’t wanted.”

2.4 Team Failures

The success of a Six Sigma team depends on team members who are willing and able to support the work of the team. Of course team members balance multiple priorities, and not all are likely to be perfectly suited to the project at hand. So at times the Black Belt deals with team members who fail to get the job done. Below is an example of what team failures look like.

“If I am not physically seeing the project team members, and the project is not moving along, then they’ll lose interest. People are giving 20 percent of their time, but it is sort of down the food chain for them. It can be ‘out of sight, out of mind.’”

2.5 Stakeholder Fear

Six Sigma projects are designed to make process improvements. This very goal makes some managers and process owners nervous. After all, how can a process be improved if it isn’t faulty to begin with? And who will be blamed for the faulty process that existed before the improvements? As a result, some Black Belts have to work with stakeholders who are fearful and defensive.

Most Six Sigma deployments go to great lengths to make sure the process isn’t punitive. But, as the Black Belt quoted below says, it can be hard not to tarnish a reputation.
“I think the biggest fear people have is that Six Sigma is going to come in and find some major gap in their performance, a gap their boss or their boss’s boss doesn’t know about—a gap they should have corrected on their own. We do a lot to try to say, ‘You won’t be punished,’ but sometimes the process owner comes out of the process looking really stupid.”

3. The Frequency and Impact of these Five Crucial Conversations

The Table 1 shows how common and how pervasive these five crucial conversations are in Six Sigma. Between 70 and 91 percent of the Black Belts surveyed had experienced each problem. What’s worse, between 47 and 72 percent of the Black Belts experience these problems on more than a quarter of the projects they lead.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Crucial Conversation</th>
<th>Black Belt has Experienced this Problem</th>
<th>Black Belt Experiences this problem on More than a Quarter of his/her Projects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AWOL Executives &amp; Sponsors</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Powerful Opponents</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skirting</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team Failures</td>
<td>94%</td>
<td>64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stakeholder Fear</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When one of these crucial problems occurs but is not addressed effectively, the Six Sigma project is much less likely to achieve its goals. The table below shows what it costs the organization in lost time and resources when the Black Belt is unable to have an effective conversation to resolve the challenge in a timely and respectful manner.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Crucial Conversation</th>
<th>Miss Timelines or Savings Targets</th>
<th>Fail to Achieve Quality-Improvement Goals</th>
<th>Team Morale Is Damaged</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AWOL Executives &amp; Sponsors</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Powerful Opponents</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skirting</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team Failures</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stakeholder Fear</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What is really interesting is that the majority of the Black Belts surveyed attempted to hold the necessary crucial conversation to solve the problem, but for most, the conversation did not go well. The vast majority said the conversation failed. Either they noticed the conversation was getting risky and they backed off before making their point, or their sponsor became defensive and stopped listening.

None of these five problems is a death sentence for a Six Sigma project, but each challenge does signal the need to have a crucial conversation. Our data shows Black Belts who effectively speak up in a timely manner have a profoundly positive impact on the course of their projects. When compared to Black Belts who either failed to speak up or failed to speak up effectively, these effective Black Belts accomplished tremendous results including:

- Achieving significantly better results.
- Performing better relative to quality, scope, timelines, and savings targets.
- Maintaining better team morale.
- Maintaining or improving their relationship with the Sponsor, other Black Belt, or Team Member.¹

4. Can People be taught to speak Up More Effectively?

VitalSmarts’ research and consulting experience demonstrates that it is possible to rapidly address these few crucial conversations and profoundly improve Six Sigma results. For example, in one Fortune 500 firm, the CEO and his leadership team worked aggressively for nine months to improve managers’ and Black Belts’ ability to resolve five specific crucial conversations.

Using a survey, we tested whether the conversations were actually improving. We also tracked departmental improvements in quality, productivity, and cycle time. A study conducted by independent researchers found that every one percent improvement in survey measures of the targeted conversations corresponded with productivity savings of more than $1.5 million. Similar correlations with quality and cycle time were demonstrated as well.

The results were significant—our first survey showed an improvement of 13 percent in people’s ability to hold the five crucial conversations. Relationships between previously conflicting teams, between frontline workers and their supervisors, and between work teams and senior management improved markedly. Many commented that Six Sigma had become “real.” As further evidence of the relationship between crucial conversations and performance improvement, there were no cases of significant improvement in performance where there were not also corresponding improvements in survey measures of crucial conversations.

The following are first steps senior leaders, Six Sigma Champions, and Black Belts can take to both address these crucial conversations when they face them, and to build organizational competence at resolving them system-wide.

5. What Leaders can do?

5.1 Focus Attention

The crucial issues are so common that most leaders have stopped seeing them. Leaders should not expect to improve their organization’s competence at these five crucial conversations without making them visible in the organization. Leaders can do this by drawing attention to the crucial nature of these issues. Sharing the data in this article is a great way to start conversations and escalate the importance of addressing these issues.

5.2 Measure behaviors

Leaders who are serious about improving how their people address these concerns regularly measure how well people across various Six Sigma projects are doing at addressing them. These measurements help draw attention to a) the existence of the crucial issues; and b) whether they are being adequately discussed and addressed.

¹ These results are all statistically significant, p < .05
5.3 Invest in skills

Most Black Belts and team members lack the confidence to address these politically sensitive issues because they simply don’t know how. Leaders who train their people to deal with these specific crucial conversations see substantial improvement in whether and how the issues get resolved. One organization saw a 150 percent increase in the frequency with which people skillfully discussed crucial issues within a year after their leaders taught their teams these vital skills. Here are a few of the skills leaders can implement when facing high-stakes, emotional, or risky conversations:

- **Reverse your thinking**: Most people decide whether or not to speak up by first considering the risks of doing so. The best communicators however, think first about the risks of not speaking up. They realize that by sharing their unique views the best decisions will be made.

- **Change your emotions**: Before opening your mouth, open your mind. Don’t wait to speak up until you’re angry or disgusted with other’s views and opinions. Rather, try to separate people from the problem and see others as reasonable, rational, and decent human beings.

- **Help others feel safe**: People don’t become defensive until they feel unsafe. Start high-stakes conversations by assuring the other person of your positive intentions and your respect for them. When others feel respected and trust your motives, they let their guard down and begin to listen—even if the topic is unpleasant.

- **Invite dialogue**: After you create a safe environment, confidently share your views and then invite differing opinions. If you are open to hearing others’ points of view, they’ll be more open to yours.

5.4 Hold senior management accountable

Investing in project participants’ competence at holding crucial conversations is necessary but insufficient. Holding sponsors, managers, and executives accountable for creating a safe environment for these crucial conversations is the other half of the formula. The best even tie it to senior leadership bonuses and performance evaluations.

5.5 Reward

Executives should highlight and reward people who take a risk and raise these crucial conversations. The key to getting 100 people to speak up is to publicly reward the first one who does. Be sure to send a clear and public message that these conversations aren’t just important, they’re crucial—and those who raise them are highly valued.

6. Conclusion

This paper demonstrates that the pervasive failure of the five crucial conversations contributes profoundly to widespread disappointment and disaster in critical project execution. The most important result we hope comes from this study is to draw attention to these five conversations so that Black Belts, leaders and other project managers can begin to address them with appropriate intensity. The data suggest that, when this is done, the
result will allow the talents of project participants to more consistently lead to flawless execution and stellar results.

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