

VitalSmarts™ White Paper

Beyond “Flavor of the Month”

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An Essential Ingredient for Impressive Six Sigma Success

How could massive leadership involvement, millions in consulting assistance, and three overwhelmingly successful pilot projects come to this? After two years of tireless effort, Kanter¹ (the CEO) admitted they were dead in the water. “How are we ever going to get off dead center with Six Sigma?” he fumed.

The program couldn’t make more sense. It couldn’t get more support. And they couldn’t have a more seasoned consulting partner. And yet the only parts of the company where people had really adopted the tools were places where, according to Kanter, “We used brute force.” But he realized these were costly victories, “The executive committee can’t sustain this whole thing by sheer will—there aren’t enough of us to go around.”

After a grim silence, he added, “Why are we stuck?”

What was slowly smothering their Six Sigma initiative was the same creeping disease that had laid waste to the vast majority of similarly promising projects in recent decades. Clues to the root cause of the impenetrable resistance Kanter faced were discovered by interviewing members of teams who confidently predicted Six Sigma was just another “Flavor of the Month.”

“They call me a ‘black belt,’ and yet I’m getting the crud kicked out of me by everyone who’s supposed to be supporting me. First my VP assigns me to an anemic project, then when the subject matter experts don’t show up for our meetings she asks me just to ‘be patient.’ I know when I’m being shined on and this is it.”

“Let’s face it, if you want to make an omelet you’ve got to break some eggs. If we want to drive aggressive change through six sigma, the fact is there will be some winners and some losers. I’m tired of attending meetings where we dance around what’s really wrong and suggest everything except the painful and useful solutions. I’ve got better things to do than sit around and pretend to be involved when my peers aren’t really bought in. “

“My boss only pretends to support it to pose for his next promotion. Three years ago we tried to move our software engineering processes up a notch. Every time we tried to enforce the quality standards, someone above him would demand he blow through them to meet a deadline—and he’d roll over. Oh, don’t get me wrong, I’ll attend the classes. I’ll say the right things. But this too shall pass.”

“Lean Manufacturing, TQM, SPC. I don’t care what you call it, it’s all the same warmed-over junk. Every CEO has to make his name by coming up with some new program. I’ll believe it’s for real when the CEO holds his own staff accountable for leading change. Just last week our line VP told us to quit measuring all this stuff because he already knows what the problems are. So now we’re running around reacting to his brilliant ideas instead of following the process. I’ll believe it’s real when our CEO makes them walk the talk.”

The Acronym of the Month

What do SPC, JIT, CQI, TQM, and BPR all have in common?

All are acronyms. All were very promising acronyms. Advocates of Total Quality Management swore that their system either had no kinship with or at least went far beyond Statistical Process Control. Business Process Reengineering gurus worked hard to draw a similar distinction from TQM. Today some Six Sigma Consultants argue vehemently that the bloodlines of their approach are unsullied by TQM and BPR parentage.

Every serving of this alphabet soup was heralded by corporations across the world expending massive amounts of hope, money, and leadership attention. And yet all but one of these management initiatives is now passé, having left 75 percent or more of

their once-zealous adherents with little to show but failure and cynicism.² And if the past predicts the future, Six Sigma could similarly underperform its great potential—in spite of the significantly more robust approach to organizational change many Six Sigma devotees employ.

So Right and Yet So Wrong

The tragedy here is that every one of these management tools had the potential to be much more. There was nothing wrong with any of these systems in principle. Each made terrific sense. Who could argue with the need to make evidence-driven decisions, look for systemic root causes, consider up- and downstream implications of individual tasks, focus on external stakeholders, and so on?

What’s peculiar in all this is how much energy the original “inventors” and purveyors of each of these past movements puts into denying the heritage of their brain child. In spite of arguments to the contrary, many of these basic principles find their roots as far back as Alfred P. Sloan, and some echo centuries back in Adam Smith.

In a worthy attempt to save them from the fate of their forbears, management gurus have repackaged, renamed, and reframed their evolved versions of time-tested ideas. They’ve done so under the mistaken impression that their approach could succeed on theoretical merit alone—if just given a fair chance. But none of these evolutionary contributions died of genetic causes. New research shows that the high mortality rate of management methods is not due to congenital defects. Rather, they die of socially transmitted diseases.

How could such promising, theoretically sound, and well-funded programs end up in the trash heap alongside perishable commodities and passing fads? It turns out that the reasons for their underperformance had nothing to do with the presence of a problem in these programs. It had to do with the absence of one crucial element in the social systems that rejected them.

Our research into foundering Six Sigma programs³ showed that what gets promising programs stuck, and eventually smothers them, is a culture where people consistently fail to confront a handful of crucial conversations. Here’s how we discovered this vital principle.

No Matter How Cynical You Are, It’s Not Enough

Over the past twenty years, we’ve partnered with senior leaders in over fifty large-scale change efforts. In most cases, we entered an organization thick with cynicism. Long-timers could tick off the list of catchy names of programs past, and would even trot out a collection of related mugs and T-shirts extensive enough to host and clothe a small town. They used this overwhelming evidence to confirm their prediction that their wild-eyed leader’s new scheme would likewise fail.

And yet we'd never seen it worse than in Kanter's organization. Not only had previous efforts failed, but through a classic case of natural selection, all those who had a genetic predisposition toward optimism had been culled from the herd. It all started with TQM.

Five years before our arrival, Kanter's company was neck deep in TQM from the CEO on down. Staffs of TQM facilitators were trained and certified. Then in an unrelated disaster, a major product line failed. Then that CEO was replaced by a new one with an aggressive cost-cutting mandate. People knew they were in trouble when he produced a hatchet rather than a scalpel.

First, the massive expenditures in TQM were halted. Next, leaders began looking around to determine who could be counted surplus. And guess who looked most expendable? Those who had given up “real jobs” to help advance TQM. After all, since the program was dead, these folks were irrelevant, right? Off with their heads. As they cleaned out their desks, those who remained took a life lesson from the experience: Cozying up with a flavor of the month program was like becoming that deer in the *Far Side* cartoon who was born with markings in the shape of an enormous target. The caption on the cartoon had one deer saying to his unfortunately tattooed friend, “Bummer of a birthmark, Hal.”

The CEO-shuffle continued until Kanter. To say people in Kanter's organization were cynical would be like saying Mike Tyson was testy. They saw cynicism as a survival skill.

It's Not Content, It's Conversations

While the bloodbath that accompanied the cancellation of the TQM was the most recent evidence people cited about why Six Sigma would fail, it was by no means their only argument.

In an attempt to find a way to get to the root of the widespread resistance to Six Sigma, we interviewed both black belts and teams that had made no progress in spite of massive investments in training and support. Next we interviewed the teams that had adopted and aggressively implemented Six Sigma principles. The differences could not have been more stark. And the message could not have been more surprising.

The most startling finding was that all those we interviewed were identically convinced that Six Sigma was the right thing to do. No one had a beef with the *content* of Six Sigma. You couldn't differentiate laggards from leaders by how logically persuaded they were about the merit and even the urgency of Six Sigma measures. We were speechless.

What clearly and consistently separated the teams was the belief in some (and disbelief in the others) that Six Sigma would receive the social support needed to bear fruit. When asked why they believed Six Sigma would fail, team members told stories about hypocritical bosses, lazy teammates, politically motivated senior managers—and, of course, the mass layoffs that were seared into organizational memory. Interestingly, in

the successful teams—who had likewise lived through the previous failures—we saw the mirror image of these expectations. Almost.

When asked how they knew Six Sigma would succeed, effective team members and black belts didn't just describe happy social circumstances that made Six Sigma a sure bet. Surprisingly, they encountered about as many barriers to implementation as the cynical teams. The difference was that they chose to confront these barriers—and by so doing *created* the social support they needed to succeed. In essence, they described how they dealt with crucial conversations that we found were essential to confronting the inevitable barriers people face when trying to gain compliance with any new standard.

The key learning here was that what it takes for new and counter-cultural practices to take root is not primarily a welcoming social climate. Rather, it is individuals who step up to the crucial conversations required to create the right social support. The basic logic goes like this: Any significant social change creates winners and losers. It involves a redistribution of power. It requires refocusing of resources and attention on priorities that aren't in some leaders' top drawers. Thus, if you're hoping for significant improvement through a Six Sigma intervention, you should count on corresponding resistance. So the success or failure of a bold change effort is less likely to fail based on the technical merits of the project than on whether or not individuals are capable of dealing effectively with the inevitable resistance they will engender in the course of driving change.

Time and again we found that the effective black belts and project teams had encountered resistance, but had found ways to confront and resolve it *at their own level* in ways that led to breakthroughs. Those who had no such ability remained stuck. The key issue, it turned out, was not whether or not everyone supported change, it was what change agents did when (not *if*) they face resistance.

In short, cynicism begins not when you encounter a problem, but rather when you draw a conclusion. Let's see how.

If You're Stuck, Find the Crucial Conversations Keeping You There

Here's a case in point. Karla came back from her first Lean/Six Sigma training excited. She didn't learn anything particularly new. Rather, she was hopeful that this would finally give her a platform to do things she had known for years needed doing. In a debrief meeting with her team she reported that she had committed to participate in an integrated “Kanban” JIT system with other related groups. Her boss nodded suspiciously as she described it, but she figured the results would speak for themselves as inventories were reduced and error rates dropped across the department.

Two weeks later she threw her hands in the air and gave up. One of her team's suggestions would have required her boss to move his cubicle a little farther from the aisle. Her boss turned it down and asked her to come up with another way. There wasn't another way. She had already explained that. She concluded that the inviolable principle in her team was the

boss’s convenience, not the “value stream.” She stopped attending Kanban meetings, and the effort soon withered.

Karla’s story echoes that of everyone we interviewed who expressed cynicism about Six Sigma. All told of experiences from which they had drawn negative conclusions. Interestingly, those who succeeded also had dispiriting experiences somewhere along the way. The difference was in what they did—and how others responded—when the disappointment happened.

Here’s the lesson we learned by comparing these black belts and teams: Whenever you draw a conclusion about another person or team, you have two choices: 1) You can talk it out, or 2) you can act it out. In other words, you can either confront the barrier and attempt to resolve it, or you can conclude that the issue is undiscussable, and act out the conclusion you’ve drawn. The result is completely predictable.

If, for example, you conclude that your boss is self-serving and disingenuous about his or her support for your improvement efforts, you have these two choices. If you successfully talk it out (which requires first, skill on your part, and second, modest receptivity on your boss’s part), there is a chance you will change your conclusion, change the other person’s behavior, or a combination of the two. If you choose not to attempt to talk it out, you *will* act it out. Your behavior and attitude will be influenced by this conclusion from this point forward. It’s a short walk from being cynical about the boss to being cynical about your improvement aspirations. And that’s what happened to Karla.

Our research into resistant and receptive teams in Six Sigma shows that there are four kinds of crucial conversations people must be able to hold if they hope to adopt and sustain these valuable practices. These crucial conversations enable them to talk out rather than act out the four sources of cynicism that inevitably suck the life out of promising programs. The four most common conclusions that feed resistance are:

1. Upper management isn’t really committed.
2. My boss will never support this.
3. My peers aren’t held accountable for supporting the effort
4. Other departments won’t cooperate.

Now, we aren’t suggesting that these conclusions are incorrect. Typically people have valid reasons to suspect these conclusions are true (e.g., “I don’t trust senior management because they whacked everyone who supported TQM”). The problem is that people don’t just assume these conclusions are correct, they assume they’re permanent.

In successful departments, when people found resistance in one of these four forms, they found ways to raise their concerns. More often than not, if they raised them in a way that didn’t provoke defensiveness, they could influence the attitude or behavior of the troublesome party. Almost as often, they also found that reality wasn’t quite as bad as their

conclusion. They'd discover, for example, that upper management didn't understand the implications of their actions. Or their boss was not simply uncommitted, he or she was overwhelmed. What was important about these crucial conversations was that they often produced change both in the other person's behavior and in the initiator's perception.

In one telling exchange, an ambivalent team contacted Kanter personally and asked for a meeting. During this exchange they tentatively expressed their reservations about the life-expectancy of Six Sigma adherents. While Kanter couldn't promise job security, and couldn't promise that he'd be around forever, the very fact that these people discovered that they could raise their concerns with senior management increased their belief that Kanter was trustworthy. While reality and risks didn't change, their perceptions of Kanter did, and they got on board.

In the poor performing teams, a self-fulfilling prophecy replaced a crucial conversation. Since people concluded Six Sigma was a sham, they withdrew their support. As they did so, the effort stalled, which confirmed their original assumption that it was a waste of time. Similarly, those who believed it would never work because no one ever held their deadbeat peers accountable were so confident of their conclusion that they didn't bother expressing it. The result: their colleagues still weren't being held accountable, and the cynics used this as additional evidence that they were right all along.

The only way out of this circular reasoning is the opposite of the way in. People must find a way to surface, test, and change their conclusion—or they will act it out with predictable consequences. And the only way to test and change these kinds of conclusions is by stepping up to crucial conversations.

In light of these findings, Kanter and his senior team determined to make a serious effort to influence how people approached the four crucial conversations that most consistently produced cynicism and withdrawal.

1. Approaching a senior manager who isn't walking his or her talk about Six Sigma.
2. Giving feedback to a boss who seems unsupportive of improvement efforts.
3. Challenging peers who are resisting or violating what needs to happen.
4. Resolving problems with other departments who aren't cooperating.

Through a serious effort to change these vital elements of their culture, they unlocked spontaneous and rapid support in Six Sigma implementation.

Fulfilling the Promise of Six Sigma

While all this might sound theoretically interesting, even persuasive, it's useless unless confirmed by real experience.

Over the next nine months, Kanter and his leadership team worked aggressively to influence how people approached these crucial conversations across their organization. The results were rapid and measurable.

Using a survey, we tested whether crucial conversations practices were actually changing. We also tracked departmental improvements in quality, productivity and cycle time. A correlation study conducted by independent researchers found that every 1 percent improvement in survey measures of the targeted crucial conversations corresponded with productivity savings of over \$1,500,000. Similar correlations with quality and cycle time were demonstrated as well.

The results were significant—our first survey showed an improvement of 13 percent—a sizable leap when you consider the well-honed cynicism leaders were up against. Written comments on the survey included statements like, “Who is this man and where did my *real* supervisor go?” 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.*

Yeah, but Is It Sustainable?

Now we come to the final question. We have strong evidence that crucial conversations are a key to adoption of new and promising practices in an organization. We also have repeated studies that show it is possible to make rapid and significant progress in how people approach crucial conversations even in highly resistant organizations. But the final question is the kicker. How can you ensure that crucial conversations don’t just become the next “Flavor of the Month”?

To be truthful, we’ve seen both postscripts. We’ve seen organizations that take their eye off this all-important ball. They stop working on how people deal with crucial conversations, and, predictably, they get stuck.

We’ve seen even more cases where, when implemented in the business-relevant way as we’ve described here, leaders become so confirmed in their belief about the applicability of crucial conversations that it profoundly affects the way they lead throughout their careers. In these cases, there may be both progress and backsliding, but in general they continue to pay attention to this core principle of effective organizational culture.

Can leaders sustain healthy crucial conversations practices? Yes. Do they all? No. Ultimately, asking whether the concept is sustainable is asking the wrong question. In the end, it all comes down to leadership. Those leaders who attend consistently to how their people deal with the conversations that are most crucial to peak performance reap ongoing rewards. Those who don’t pay attention to these crucial conversations get stuck, and then go in search of the next flavor of the month.

Notes

¹ Names changed.

² In “Beyond the Fads: How Leaders Drive Change with Results” (Human Resource Planning 17, no. 2 [1994]: 25–44), Ron Ashkenas suggests the failure rate is 75 percent or more. Other studies suggest much higher. Our survey of relevant studies puts it in the 85 percent range.

³ VitalSmarts principals have conducted over 100 systematic “culture assessments” over the past twenty years. These assessments helped identify barriers to change in Six Sigma, Lean, and other major change initiatives. The conclusions in this article draw from both the broader set of assessments and from research into Six Sigma and related initiatives.