

The Role of a Champion in Lean Six Sigma Projects

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A successful Lean Six Sigma project delivers expected results. The business roles and responsibilities must be clearly defined and aligned for a successful deployment. The probability of success is high when a Champion /Black Belts / Green Belts are completely trained on Lean Six Sigma culture. Trained project team members play an important role in the success of a project. Also, there are numerous other factors that contribute to this success. The most critical of these is 'the role of a champion'. Let's discuss more... In a typical Process Excellence structure, Black Belts are supported by Master Black Belts. Black Belts are knowledgeable and skilled in the use of the Lean Six Sigma methodology and tools. They are responsible for implementing process excellence projects. Green Belts will lead a process improvement or quality improvement team as part of their full time job. Their degree of knowledge and skills associated with Six Sigma need not be as much as that of a Black Belt. The project team effectively and efficiently achieves milestones. The relationship between the project team, Green Belts, Black Belts and a Master Black belt is understandable in a process excellence structure. The role of a champion is of paramount importance for successful deployment.

Most business establishments refer to champions as 'the one who removes roadblocks'. It's apparently true. Champions should foresee the roadblocks, remove roadblocks and steer the projects. Champions ought to be, diplomatically in a position to diffuse any issues that may arise between a black belt and others in an organization.

The function of a champion is to produce change, setting the direction of that change is fundamental to champion. Setting direction is not just planning. Because planning is designed to produce orderly results, not change. Setting direction is more inductive. Champions can gather data; look for patterns, relationships and linkages that help explain things. The direction setting aspect of a champion creates vision and strategy. These describe a business, technology, or corporate culture in terms of what should become long term and articulate a feasible way of achieving this goal.

A complete Champion requires more than just 'removing roadblocks' and 'change catalyst' skill sets. Champions must be proficient primarily in six 'I's: Intellectual, Imagination, Innovation, Interpersonal Skills, Involvement and Implementation.

Intellectual

Champions should possess intellectual in-depth domain knowledge, its operations and organizational vision. They should know the technology employed to deliver services. Primarily, they should establish connectivity, right from organizational vision / values to delivering services to end customer. Champions

always almost have fairly good domain knowledge and of technology in use; this should not encourage them to offer solutions to Black Belts. Rather, they should use their knowledge to set the direction.

Imagination

Imagination aims at scoping the project with realistic timelines. While scoping, champions must ensure that the operational level projects are aligned with strategic business objectives. Also, scoping the project appropriately improves the chance of success. The champion and Black belt should have clear understanding whether the metric selected for improvement will comprehensively address the voice of customer, articulate problem statement and lead towards project goal. Effective communication between the champion and Black belt will help in ensuring that the project doesn't go out of scope, else resulting in 'scope creep'. At this point, champions are in reasonable position to take a call on project duration and deliverable timelines.

Innovation

"There is nothing more powerful than an idea whose time has come." – Victor Hugo. When I talk about innovation, I couldn't resist from quoting Victor Hugo.

Out-of-the box thinking leads to creative ideas. Innovation is understood as successful implementation of creative ideas in an organization. Innovation creates a new business space to operate. As a differentiator, innovation provides the edge over your competitors. Innovation is not a one-time fix; it is an ongoing attribute of a successful organization. As domain experts, champions should review if the solution is innovative and sustainable over long term.

Interpersonal skills

Champions with positive interpersonal skills will be able to relate to one another. Interpersonal skills are one's ability to operate within organization through social communication and interaction. Champions with positive interpersonal skills will be able to manage their emotions in difficult times and respond logically / appropriately. This reduces conflicts within an organization and increases productivity. Interpersonal skills certainly have its impact on the project.

Involvement

Champions drive the project at operational level. The operations / project team derive attitude from champions. Therefore, the onus is on the champion to actively involve themselves in kick-off meeting, project charters, project reviews and so on. Weekly project meeting is a better way to track the progress against milestones and timelines. This prevents any surprises to anyone during project reviews. As the line between involving and controlling is very thin, champions must clearly identify this and should not control the project at any point. Their involvement should be as that of a perfect facilitator.

Implementation

Champions must actively participate, along with Black belts, in implementing the project effectively and calculating financial benefits. The finance department should sign-off on the potential savings. Metrics drives performance; Champions' performance must be measured on implementation and financial benefits as part of their Key Result Areas (KRAs). Without accountability, Lean Six Sigma is bound to fail in any business establishment. The bigger picture is in the organization's failing to imbibe Lean Six Sigma culture in its DNA.

Summary

Champions are just not 'one who removes roadblocks' and act as 'change catalyst' in successful Lean Six Sigma projects. They have a much bigger role to play. Champions' domain knowledge must be integrated with organizational vision, and scope the project appropriately to achieve strategic business objective.

Champions should be actively involved in projects as perfect facilitators. Champions should take responsibility of implementing the project. Anything that is not measured doesn't exist; Responsibilities of a champion should be measured. This prevents organization failing on Lean Six Sigma culture.

(Note: Authors have not directly referred to any other existing papers/articles while writing this paper. If it matches with the views expressed in any existing articles, it is purely coincidental)