

# Creating a Six Sigma Culture

Six Sigma is about creating a culture of customer focus and internal precision. Thus, it is a natural fit with the rigor of pharmaceutical manufacturing.

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Many Six Sigma efforts confront cultural inertia — gravitational pull for people to do things “the way we’ve always done them.” How do you help people embrace Six Sigma? The key is to treat your efforts as a *culture change*.

## Organizational Culture

*Organizational culture is a pattern of behaviors that is reinforced or punished by people and systems over time* (Braksick, *Unlock Behavior, Unleash Profits*, McGraw-Hill 2000, p. 199). To explain:

- *Organizational culture is a pattern of behavior . . .* there are predictable patterns to what people say and do.
- *. . . that is reinforced or punished . . .* consequences happen every time you do or say something. Consequences can be positive, negative, or a combination.
- *. . . by people and systems . . .* consequences come from interpersonal interactions (like feedback, body language, memos) and organizational systems (incentives, promotions, preferential work assignments).
- *. . . over time . . .* relationships are well-established between what people say and do (behavior) and what they experience as a result (consequences).

## An Example

You are new to Superstar, Inc. Carl, the Black Belt of Project Spotlight (a visible project aimed at reducing batch recall), asked you to join a problem-solving session with the process owner, Matt. Before the meeting, Carl said the team is ready to hand off the project to Matt for implementation. But Matt has been difficult to engage. Carl is holding the meeting to address Matt’s concerns and increase his buy-in.

Carl encourages you to add your ideas, because he values your experience and the group enjoys a candid relationship. When Carl introduces you, everyone—including Matt—gives you a warm welcome.

An issue surfaces. Team members grow quiet. You offer a suggestion to get the ball rolling. People who were smiling and talking with you only moments ago break eye contact. They look at their notes and play with their pens. After an uncomfortable silence, Matt looks at the team and, without acknowledging your suggestion, explains how he thinks the issue should be addressed.

Another issue comes up. You share how you have successfully addressed the issue before. The team doesn’t look at you at all. They push back from the table and cross their arms. Matt peers at you over the top of his glasses. He clears his throat and explains how he thinks the team should address the issue.

Later, another issue surfaces that you have successfully addressed. You are faced with a choice between sharing your ideas or staying silent. What do you do?

Let's use our definition of culture to help us understand what just happened:

- *Organizational culture is a pattern of behavior . . .* Focus on the behavior of sharing ideas in meetings on how to address issues.
- *. . . that is reinforced or punished . . .* The consequences for sharing ideas, at least in the presence of a perceived authority (Matt), appear negative. They decrease how often people offer ideas before hearing what the authority has to say.
- *. . . by people or systems . . .* People gave you consequences through statements, body language (team members broke eye contact, leaned back, crossed arms; Matt peered over his glasses and cleared his throat), or silence (no one acknowledged what you said).
- *. . . over time . . .* It appears the team had enough experience with this behavior to predict how you would be treated. They all reacted similarly the first time you spoke.

Whether your experience in this meeting represents Superstar's culture at large remains to be seen. If it does, Superstar's culture probably doesn't support the risk-taking and creative thinking Six Sigma requires.

### Six Sigma Culture

Let's look at some cultural trends that support—or discourage—Six Sigma success.

	<b>Behavior Patterns that Support Six Sigma</b>	<b>Behavior Patterns that Impede Six Sigma</b>
<b>Creativity in Problem Solving</b>	Project teams generate and explore creative approaches to solve problems and improve process performance	Project teams are limited in their problem-solving ideas, like in Project Spotlight
<b>Role Definition</b>	Black Belts, Champions, Process Owners, etc. define their roles and hold each other accountable for fulfilling those roles	Black Belts, Champions, Process Owners, etc. do not clearly define their roles and grow frustrated when others do not fulfill their obligations
<b>Stakeholder Engagement</b>	Project teams seek interactions with stakeholders and develop plans to map what they need from stakeholders and when	Project teams approach stakeholder engagement reactively and are surprised by how many stakeholders need to be engaged and how deeply
<b>Data-Based Decision Making</b>	Leaders make decisions based on data	Leaders make decisions based on anecdotal evidence or "gut feel"
<b>Reporting and Reward Systems</b>	A reporting and reward structure facilitates career development, recognition, and accountability for those engaged in Six Sigma.  Role expectations and agreements are embedded in performance management systems.	People engage in Six Sigma efforts without backfilling for their existing responsibilities, developing a career development plan, or leveraging performance accountability systems—in short, "during their spare time"

	<b>Behavior Patterns that Support Six Sigma</b>	<b>Behavior Patterns that Impede Six Sigma</b>
<b>Talent Allocation</b>	Talented people are devoted to key projects or efforts, and they see projects through to completion	Projects or efforts are staffed with whomever is available; accountability tends to pass from person to person
<b>Process Fluency</b>	People are fluent in using processes to guide their day-to-day actions	People focus on what is immediately in front of them and priorities change quickly
<b>Constancy of Purpose</b>	People describe a “constancy of purpose” in the organization	People describe a “flavor of the month” tendency in the organization

At the heart of each cultural trend is behavior—what people do and say. Here’s what happens when the culture is not aligned with Six Sigma:

- “Sponsors say Six Sigma is important. But when push comes to shove, they are more likely to say ‘Just get it done’ than ‘Make sure you have explored several ideas to get to the best.’”
- “I heard the VP discussing his priorities for regulatory compliance. Our Six Sigma projects weren’t even mentioned. Why am I working so hard if these projects aren’t important to him?”
- “Those Black Belts are creating processes we can’t realistically implement.”
- “My boss asked me to participate on the team focused on dose content uniformity, but made it clear I cannot let my other responsibilities suffer—and nothing was taken off my plate.”
- “The CEO says, ‘Focus on process and savings will follow,’ but the COO says, ‘Let’s go for immediate savings.’ Should we focus on fixing this process to get at root causes, or not?”

### Creating a Six Sigma Culture

The good news is that it *is* possible to shape a culture to support Six Sigma. It means changing the pattern of behaviors that is reinforced and punished.

Start by answering these questions:

1. What behaviors are needed to support Six Sigma?
2. How will we consciously reinforce those behaviors via personal interactions and formal systems?
3. How will we consciously discourage behaviors that don’t support a Six Sigma culture via personal interactions and formal systems?

While these questions appear straightforward, they will reveal tricky issues to address. Some advice:

- *Catch People Doing it Right.* Telling people what behaviors you want and don’t want won’t be enough to change the culture. You will be prompting behavior change, which has only about a 20% effect on whether behavior is sustained. Consequences have the other 80% — especially when you catch people doing the behavior *right*. When people are doing behaviors that support Six Sigma, tell them you notice and appreciate it. Tell them how they are making a difference. Over time, promote and reward people who consistently “do it right.”
- *Appreciate People Doing it Right.* Creating a Six Sigma culture means catching people doing

it right *on average* 4 times to every 1 time you catch them doing it wrong. This means that there need to be more positive consequences across time and across all people in the organization to encourage behaviors that support the Six Sigma culture you want.

- *Measure People Doing it Right.* Measure whether people are engaging in the behaviors that support a Six Sigma culture. Make those measures matter. Put them into leadership team reviews, performance reviews, and project reviews.

Here's what it looks like when the culture is aligned with Six Sigma:

- At the outset of every project in her area, the VP of Quality meets with the Black Belt to clarify expectations. They talk about her role, what she expects from the Black Belt, and what the Black Belt needs from her. They follow up regularly.
- A Black Belt has a standing agenda item at every meeting to review stakeholder support. The team identifies whose support will be needed and then plans interactions with those stakeholders. They track levels of stakeholder support and have problem-solving conversations about how to increase support.
- Black Belts have a performance review measure that holds them accountable for satisfying process owners' needs. This encourages Black Belts to engage process owners early and often to iron out concerns process owners have.
- The Six Sigma dashboard reviewed at quarterly management reviews includes leading indicators of success—including levels of stakeholder support and indicators of behavior change in support of Six Sigma.

### **Big Things and Little Things**

Creating a Six Sigma culture requires big things, like incorporating Six Sigma goals into performance reviews. But creating a Six Sigma culture also requires little things, like people having conversations about what they need from each other. Here is an example. Imagine how the meeting for Project Spotlight might have gone if Carl had approached Matt before-hand and said,

“Matt, I'm glad you're joining us. We want to generate options to address the concerns you've expressed about successfully implementing the recommended process changes. The team will take the ideas and work after the meeting to assess how to ensure implementability while preserving the efficiencies designed into the process.

“When we have had similar discussions in the past, some people feel you have not heard their ideas. I've noticed that you listen to what they say, and then offer your own opinion without acknowledging their contributions. I've seen people go quiet as a result. Have you noticed this?

“I think you and I should work together to get as many options on the table as possible. You can contribute by helping us understand your concerns and by encouraging the team to generate creative ideas. You might be tempted to jump in and evaluate those ideas. I suggest you don't do so at this point. We'll have the opportunity for that once we get everything on the table. What are your thoughts about how we can get the most out of the meeting?”

When it comes to creating a Six Sigma culture, little things can make a big difference.

### ***About the Author***

Dr. Tracy Thurkow is chief operating officer and head of people systems for CLG. In this capacity, she provides oversight for all CLG business operations, as well as key people processes such as recruiting, staffing and consultant readiness.

An expert in the behavioral implications of Six Sigma and other large-scale organizational change initiatives, Thurkow also serves as a CLG consultant and she has worked with numerous Fortune 100 companies to improve their performance across a variety of challenge areas.

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