

Blurry Six Sigma Vision?

by ASQ staff writer

One of the first steps executives and deployment champions can take in demonstrating their commitment to a Six Sigma initiative is to create a vision statement. While it's true that overly lofty or vague visions are easily dismissed by staff who have more immediate and pragmatic concerns (*"That's all true, but what does it have to do with me?"*), a thoughtfully crafted vision statement can mobilize an organization and set the tone for an entire implementation.

A good Six Sigma vision statement articulates both the current motivation and future goals for the initiative, fulfilling the following functions:

- Demonstrates that leadership fully understands why you are implementing Six Sigma
- Expresses what "can be" and what "should be" under Six Sigma
- Translates to relevant actions for all staff or inspires staff to develop their own related strategies or goals to help Six Sigma succeed
- Corresponds to the organization's larger business vision and objectives

In the interests of being as specific and concrete as possible, incorporating the six sigma metric of 3.4 defects per million opportunities or using Six Sigma jargon may be tempting. Emphasis on tools, statistics, or terms, however, can suggest that the initiative is more about numbers than ideas and values, and it may send the message that the initiative is only for the experts.

Plain language works best for vision statements. If you communicate the vision effectively, it will, after all, circulate throughout the organization, not just the quality department.

Creating a vision statement from scratch

To put yourself in a helpful frame of mind for writing a practical and effective vision statement, think about how you describe Six Sigma to staff members without quality backgrounds. Better yet, think about how you describe it to family members. Some competitive research or benchmarking might also help. To get a feel for how other organizations talk about Six Sigma, read corporate reports, letters to shareholders, or other publicly available documents discussing Six Sigma goals and purpose.

Because a vision statement expresses your goals for Six Sigma, you'll need to focus on describing an imagined future state. As Judith M. Umbach points out, however, reviewing past failures can also be instructive.¹ For Six Sigma, this means examining past improvement initiatives and asking why they didn't last and what Six Sigma will do better.

In *Making Change Work: Practical Tools for Overcoming Human Resistance to Change*, Brien Palmer identifies four tools for effectively “shaping a vision” for change:

- 1. Describing success.** Team members use brainstorming techniques to imagine and describe what the future might be like—including “what they hear, see, and feel” as well as “how daily activities are different”—once change has been successful.
- 2. Key phrases exercise.** Team members write “key phrases that capture the essence of why the team exists, the need it addresses, and the goal of the team.”
- 3. More of/less of exercise.** In separate columns on a white board or flip chart, team members work together to list “*specific measurable behaviors* they expect to see more of or less of” when the change has occurred, and then rank items in order of significance.
- 4. The elevator speech.** The concept of an “elevator speech” to define Six Sigma will be familiar already to many in the Six Sigma community. In this case, however, the speech should define what Six Sigma means for your organization. Have the team create a 60-second description that all Six Sigma staff will memorize and use when asked about the initiative.²

For each of the above exercises, the team reaches a consensus and seeks feedback from others in the organization. An official vision statement representing a range of perspectives can then grow out of the results.

Create your elevator speech by filling in the blanks with the words, phrases, or sentences that best describe your own circumstances:

“We found that there is a real problem with _____, especially how it is hurting the company.”

“If we don’t do anything about it, _____ will happen.”

“We have a group of people from all the affected areas and we decided that we need _____.”

“If you are interested, we could use your help in _____.”

From Brien Palmer’s *Making Change Work: Practical Tools for Overcoming Human Resistance to Change*, pages 36-37.

Verify your vision

When you think you have finalized a vision statement, verify that it accurately communicates the message you have intended. Solicit feedback from staff who did not participate in the brainstorming process, and ask them to translate into their own words what they think it means. Also ask yourself a few evaluative questions that will help you think objectively about the statement you have written:

- Is your vision statement specific to your organization and initiative, or could it apply to any Six Sigma organization anywhere? You may want to make the statement more specialized to your industry, organization, or market.
- What does your vision statement have to do with everyday work? You certainly don't want the vision to describe work directly, but staff should be able to connect the work they do to it.
- Is the vision consistent with your current reward and recognition criteria or with new Six Sigma recognition criteria? Staff should have reason to believe that their contributions toward achieving the vision will be rewarded.
- Does your vision statement contain any technical jargon that you did not know before your exposure to Six Sigma? Find alternative words that everyone will understand.
- Is it short enough to be memorable? All staff should be able to remember and explain the vision when it is not sitting in front of them.

Follow through for success

Some staff members are bound to react skeptically to what they might perceive to be yet another new vision statement for yet another new gimmick. The best way to combat this skepticism is to demonstrate consistently your own belief in your Six Sigma vision. Personally introduce Six Sigma to staff and provide awareness training for all employees. Make certain you have resources for sustaining a long-term communication plan for sharing successes and progress. The articles listed below include some more concrete ideas for communicating your commitment to the vision.

Resources toward accomplishing your specific vision also will go a long way toward removing resistance. Dedicate sufficient resources for ongoing Six Sigma training; for acquiring and maintaining technologies, software, or equipment that will help Black Belts and improvement teams perform their roles; and for validating results and progress. When staff members start to see that Six Sigma is more than talk, your organization's vision statement will carry more weight and credibility.

Read more about leadership's role in communicating a vision

"The Top-Management Maxim"

At Tata Toyo Radiators in Pune, India, routine CEO involvement provides both symbolic and practical motivation for Six Sigma project teams.

Six Sigma Forum Executive channel, April 2004.

"Guiding Corporate Behavior: A Leadership Obligation, Not a Choice"

Corporate leaders are recognizing the need to connect employees with their organizations' visions and values, but traditional "hand-off" and "hands-off" methods of the past no longer suffice.

Journal for Quality and Participation, December 2002.

"Rooting Out Resistance"

By understanding the sources of resistance, Champions can transform uneasiness and hostility into acceptance of, and even enthusiasm for, Six Sigma.

Six Sigma Forum Champion channel, July 2002.

References

¹ Judith M. Umbach, "Crafting Your Vision for Technology," *Felicitier* 49, no.1 (2003): 10.

² Brien Palmer, *Making Change Work: Practical Tools for Overcoming Human Resistance to Change* (Milwaukee, WI: ASQ Quality Press, 2004), 32-37.

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