

Is it time to toss out the belts?

ONE MAN'S VIEW OF THE "UTTER NONSENSE" OF SIX SIGMA

The following article, titled "Break Down the Barriers" by Tony Burns, was recently posted on the Linked In web site. It is a scathing criticism of Six Sigma and its obsession with creating specialists and issuing belts to people with little education and knowledge. Whether or not your company has a Six Sigma initiative underway, I believe you'll find some good food for thought in Tony's commentary.

Years ago, young Bob M starting working in a dry wall factory. Bob was white, Anglo Saxon, private school educated, with a degree in Industrial Engineering. The factory was about 20 years old and generally ran reasonably well. It had mainly long standing employees of many races, including incidentally, Turks and Cypriots who had recently been at war. The latter resulted in occasional evening shenanigans.

Bob started work on shift. He lasted one night. The workers formed a delegation to the factory manager and threatened to go on strike if young Bob ever appeared on shift again.

Bob was elitist. He had no idea how to work with men who were uneducated but experts in their own right. A man who has been working on one machine for 20 years tends to know quite a lot about the nature of that machine. The key skill for people with university education is to build mutual respect with workers, to enable both to learn from each other.

Bob was put on days. However he continued to wreak havoc. He wanted to improve things and after all, he'd had four years training at university! One day a new shipment of gypsum arrived and the old hands installed the water sprays on the new stock pile. Old hands always make it look easy. Bob looked at it and reckoned it needed improvement. Two hours of fiddling and the site was a disaster with wash-aways everywhere. I couldn't contain myself and broke out into hysterical laughter. This didn't exactly enamor me with Bob from then on.

Today things are much worse. Companies actually encourage Bobs to fiddle with their factories. They allow Bobs to run experiments on their factories. Some even hire Bobs from outside, clasping their certificates and wearing silly colored belts. However the modern Bob does not have four years training. The modern Bob has a mere four weeks training, from a different Bob who also had four weeks training. Adding to the farce is that the four weeks training is in the utter nonsense of Six Sigma. The foundation of 'six sigma' is a joke and most of what follows is either wrong or irrelevant.

Dr Deming recognized this problem when he advocated "breaking down the barriers." We need to get all employees working together on quality, rather than building divisiveness. Quality is everyone's responsibility, not just a few Bobs who

think they know better. Everyone should be trained in quality. It is not difficult. Throw out the utter nonsense that gives zero benefit to quality, and get back to basics.

Needless to say, the article elicited a number of great responses. Quite a few people, including a couple black belts, provided very positive reviews. Other black belts responded with a great deal of defensiveness and criticism of Tony's points. In his defense, I posted the following note:

Excellent article, Tony. Dr. Deming meant it when he worded his Point 5, "Constantly and forever improve every process." He would have recognized Cpk's as a substitute for spec's, barriers to continuous improvement. "We have a Cpk = 1.33. Good enough!"

Notes

Tony Burns, "Break Down the Barriers," <http://www.linkedin.com/pulse/break-down-barriers-tony-burns>.

J. F. Leonard, "I ain't gonna teach it!", <http://www.jimleonardpi.com/blog/i-aint-gonna-teach-it/>, August 21, 2013.