

# The Busy Manager's Guide to Avoiding Six Sigma

## Author profile

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The author is a certified Master Black Belt and a chartered accountant who has over 30 years experience working with senior management on process improvement. He has coached over 1400 managers on Six Sigma deployment issues and has also trained coached and certified over 900 Black Belts. He was responsible, on behalf of a leading national quality organisation, for judging the Best in Europe Six Sigma projects, was a mentor for senior assessors for the UK Business Excellence Award, and is a former senior assessor for the European Quality Award.



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## Article background

Poorly managed Six Sigma deployments can fail, making Six Sigma just another management initiative which prevents busy managers from getting on with their job. This article highlights some light-hearted suggestions for busy managers to cope until Six Sigma goes away.

### “Do all managers have to be trained? Really? A half day should do then”

The busy manager needs to show his support, but he is after all a busy manager. How can it possibly need a week to train “project champions”? Isn't that what the Black Belts are for, to do projects? He should put his name down for champion training, but make sure his mobile phone is left on, and get his secretary to ring him at least once an hour about urgent business matters. Then he can leave the training, but everyone will remember he was there, so when he speaks on any Six Sigma related matter to a project team it will be with the authority of a trained champion.

### “What's Six Sigma got to do with our Business Strategy, anyway?”

The busy manager should make sure there is no link between any new Six Sigma deployment and his part in achieving the corporation's overall business strategy. That will ensure no conflict of interest will arise with all the other annual objectives that must be completed by Tuesday.

### “Just nod and keep quiet”

Many busy managers with targets to achieve know that nodding agreement in the management meetings will show their commitment to Six Sigma. The busy manager doesn't actually have to do anything for a few months. No-one will notice for a while. So just nod and keep your head down.

### “Wait, then make subversive comments when the right opportunities arise”

As long as the busy manager has no personal Six Sigma project-related objectives he can keep his head down until a wave or two of training is finished, make sure no time is wasted on six sigma projects and then make well considered and eminently reasonable comments about return on investment. *“Isn't it time the Black Belts and Green Belts spent a little bit more time on their day job?”* or *“I've decided to re-assign my belt resources to activities which will ensure we deliver our key business objectives”* should work.

### “These consultants are the cheapest, let's use them”

Sometimes Six Sigma training is carried out by consultants with just enough experience to know more about Six Sigma than their prospective clients. There is a noticeable increase in the number of training consultants with limited Six Sigma knowledge and experience. For the busy manager that's ok. If the nasty statistical bits are excluded as well because the consultant said they are “rarely used” we should be able get people through the training quicker and more cheaply.

## **“These consultants are the most theoretical let’s use them”**

Sometimes Six Sigma training is carried out by consultants with enough statistics experience to have forgotten more about statistics than their prospective clients will ever know. If the lovely statistical bits are included to the exclusion of everything else, especially the project reviews, because the consultant said they are “always used”, the busy manager should be able to get people who can confuse everybody and ensure no-one wants to do Six Sigma.

## **“Why do we need a Six Sigma deployment champion as well?”**

Well, “what’s the point? Most sites, processes and departments have someone responsible for making them work effectively, anyway. *“After all, we always pass the ISO 9000 (2000) audit”.* Black Belt resources are often transient or part time so why would we need an extra fulltime employee on the headcount just for leadership and mentorship support? The Black Belts could gain visibility for their successes and for any issues which require resolution at a senior level. Their managers could become exposed. Can’t have that, can we?

## **“Make sure Project Champions are not held accountable for ensuring the success of Six Sigma. Leave that to the Black Belts”**

Departmental managers are often selected as champions of projects affecting their area. Champions have an enormous influence on whether projects succeed or fail. They generally control the resource, workloads and budgets and thus have the power, consciously or unconsciously, to block or encourage improvement. The busy manager knows, however, that if senior management and the deployment champion don’t regularly review the progress of projects they have prioritised, issues such as lack of support and resource won’t be identified and he can focus on more important issues. We can always blame the Black Belts or Six Sigma if it goes wrong.

## **“Just attend the training. You can pick up a project later.”**

This one usually works. The process is: 1. Decide to do Six Sigma. 2. Select Black Belts. 3. Attend training. 4. Select project. The effect will be that discrete projects are chosen by Black Belts in complete isolation from the strategic goals of the organization. It will also be too late for them to finish them before questions are asked about return on the Six Sigma training investment. Also, projects selected in this way have the added bonus of bringing small unfocussed improvement with no major benefits. This will prove that Six Sigma doesn’t work and give an eventual return to peace and quiet. Whatever you do don’t let anyone talk you into reversing steps 2 and 4 above and having a process like this: Decide to do Six Sigma. Select projects. Select Black Belts. Attend training. Execute the right projects. The busy manager’s Six Sigma avoidance survival guide - “Selecting Six Sigma projects - an alternative approach” is the subject of a separate article, downloadable from the Paloma Consulting Limited website.

## **“You can’t be released to do Six Sigma”**

One way for the busy manager to scupper Six Sigma is to ensure the Black Belt candidate is not released from his or her old job. Try the quiet word of advice approach. “Be careful about jumping into Six Sigma full time. If it fails you might be out of a job. I want to protect my best people.” Another approach is “I just need you to finish this first....”

## **“Can’t you work on your project in the evenings; we’ve got a business to run.”**

Instructors sometimes run “time spent on project” ANOVA hypotheses to spot issues where process owners and champions say all the right things but whose Belts seem not to be completing their projects. So, if the Black Belts and Green Belts are not allowed enough time during the day to complete their projects, a bit of pressure to work on projects in the evenings should kill their enthusiasm for Six Sigma once and for all. Six Sigma is about results, so what a good idea- let’s make sure we get none then it will all go away.

## **“You’ll never make a career out of Six Sigma”**

A quiet word of advice for the keen prospective Black Belts should work. All the high flyers will steer clear, and all the dead wood will ensure it fails. That way headcount cuts can be met and the busy manager shows his support for Six Sigma (for now). Human Resources department will never dream of writing job descriptions for Black Belts. Neither will they spell out career path options for when the Black Belts have done their stint. If the busy manager doesn't have any Six Sigma objectives in his personal objectives a quiet word should ensure all those silly notions are stopped at the outset.

## **“No, sorry, Six Sigma is only for the elite!”**

The busy manager should ensure he suggests all the first groups of Black Belts on each site are put in the same room with new computers. That way they can talk about Kruskal Wallis tests, discuss technical issues with their fellow Black Belts, practice their presentation skills and look busy without ever having to go out to the shop floor or back office. After a while everyone will despise their elitism and Six Sigma and the busy manager can get on with his life unmolested. We can't have everyone spending all their time in FMEA meetings!

## **“I’m going to cancel this project – I don’t want to look bad”**

Picture the scene – the manager has been in charge of a department or process, perhaps for several years, when a Six Sigma project lands like a seagull. The project champion has failed to work with the busy manager to position the project properly. The Black Belt is parachuted in and then discovers after his measurement system analysis that the problem is much worse than the reported defect level. Time to cancel the project or get the Black Belt pulled off onto something else before it's too late. The busy manager can put lots of his own people onto the problem, control the communication and look a hero.

## **“A couple of paretos and a fishbone diagram should solve this one”**

Some Black Belts, particularly the ones who missed part of training, didn't understand it, or attended the watered down in-house version, love to stick with their favourite six sigma tools and fail to use the full range when appropriate. Fortunately for the busy manager they are often very adept at convincing deployment champions to dumb down Six Sigma to the point where it becomes non rigorous and fails to solve complex problems, thus proving the busy manager to be right all along. He can always say “nothing new here, I learned that at college”.

## **“Just hit the highlights – 5 minutes, 10 slides maximum!”**

That should work. That way when the Black Belt presents the project status to senior management the busy manager needn't worry about not knowing what (say) process capability, ANOVA or gauge R & R score mean. He can jump to solutions and retain control. It also gives him an excuse not to attend project report-outs if he can schedule a meeting to overrun.

## **“We don’t need a control plan for this simple project”**

The busy manager should make sure the Black belts don't bother with control plans. After all, if we know what the root cause of the problem is its fixed! No need to bother with documenting the standard operating procedures and realistic tolerances or filling in training matrices. I'm sure the team will take ownership of the solution. After all, it's not that much more work for them and I'm sure they appreciate the benefit for the company as a whole even if the savings show up elsewhere than in their cost centre.

## **“You’re a Black Belt now – you can conduct the training in future”**

These days budgets are always being cut. Quite often there is no Six Sigma training budget (*despite all that sales talk about it being self-funding from successful projects*). Therefore, if there is no budget expenditure there had better not be any actual expenditure or the finance department will ask for an explanation of the budget versus actual adverse variance.

How can the busy manager get round the accountants? Got it - get the new Black Belt to do the training. It’s only training after all. “You’ve been trained. You must know enough to train the others”. Also, if the champions around the business did not attend the training how would they know if the Black Belt missed out the hard bits? Then “Six Sigma” is blamed, not the busy manager. Perfect!

## **“This savings tracking system is too complicated”**

In some companies Six Sigma savings are not tracked. In other companies savings are over or understated for political reasons, or the tracking process is unclear. Project savings are needed to prove to the business that the investment in Six Sigma is worthwhile. Oh no! More meetings and grilling for the busy manager. What if the controls fail and the problem re-occurs and we get financial audits of the savings. I’m going to look bad again. The smart process owners know how to understate Six Sigma savings in case they get their budget cut. The best plan for the busy manager is to support the savings tracking process in principle but complain about the bureaucracy. That way the savings will be understated. (*This topic is the subject of a separate article by the author entitled “Costing Six Sigma Projects”.*)

## **“Why do we need special Six Sigma performance metrics? We’ve got too many already”**

The busy manager can play along with this one by proposing numbers trained be added. After a while everyone can estimate the cost and no one can see the benefits. All we need is finance to say the company is behind budget year to date and propose a few cuts and he can ask a few questions about how much it cost to train the six sigma people, and does anybody know how much that has saved? A corporate edict – hold/stop/cut should follow within a few days.

## **“Why communicate the projects’ success? We all know what happened”**

The busy manager knows that displaying projects around the site will only lead to team members asking for a pay rise or wanting to be a Black Belt or Green Belt themselves so the best course of action is to ban displays. We wouldn’t want our customers to see our dirty linen would we?

## **“And finally..... Don’t mention the customer”**

The reader may have noticed that nowhere in this article has the customer (or supplier for that matter) been mentioned. The busy manager’s last recourse is “Let’s keep the customers and suppliers out of it for now. We don’t want it all to get too complicated and give ourselves more work and grief. What’s Six Sigma got to do with suppliers and customers, anyway?”

*Perhaps you may recognise some of the above scenarios. You may see others we have encountered too but excluded from this article. If you’d like to tell us your own experiences or would like to discuss any of the above content further we would like to hear from you. Please contact the author:*

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