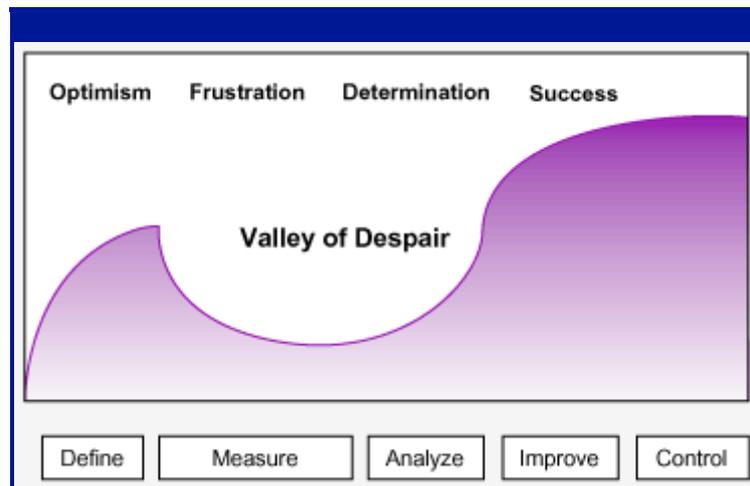


Ways to Shorten the Trip Through the 'Valley of Despair'

By Steve Crom

A predictable pattern in the life of a European Black Belt project pertains to the morale of the Black Belt as project leader. It highlights the importance of the sponsor's role in the success of any breakthrough improvement effort. Knowing the emotional ups and downs a Black Belt will face during a typical project helps the Black Belt understand what he or she is experiencing and how best to get through the inevitable "valley of despair." In addition, other actions can be taken to help project leaders, and thus improve the success rate in closing projects on time and delivering the expected business results.

The morale of a Black Belt during a six-month project typically goes through the following phases – optimism, frustration, determination and success.



Optimism

If a Black Belt is selected to lead an important project, which is highly visible to senior management, and is given adequate time to concentrate on the project, then the Belt is typically optimistic at the outset. If it is a first project, the team leader attends the first week of training which should be introduced by a member of the company's senior management. That person should be able to draw the connection between the company's strategy, priorities for improvement and the scope of the Black Belt's project. It is the job of a Master Black Belt or Six Sigma trainer/consultant to demonstrate in the first day of class, the power and potential of Six Sigma to solve chronic problems. The Black Belt will begin to relax as he or she understands that the solution to the assigned problem lies in the rigor of the DMAIC approach. The Black Belt is not expected to walk in the door with the solution. Most first week training events are up-beat, motivating experiences.

A Confidence Rating for Each Project

Before launching a project, it is a good idea for sponsors to give a "confidence rating" to each project in the pipeline. On a 1-to-10 scale for each item, the project can rated be according to:

___ The potential business benefit of the project.

___ The business leader's ability and willingness to communicate the importance and relevance of the project to the organization.

___ The sponsor's active interest in the success of the project.

___ The degree to which the team leader is dedicated to the project.

___ The team leader's determination to win, i.e., bring the project to successful completion.

___ A project scope that is focused and well-defined.

___ The availability and reliability of data for measuring outcomes and related processes.

___ The frequency with which the process repeats itself, i.e., daily, weekly, monthly.

___ The degree to which the platform upon which the process operates is stable, i.e., not subject to new technology, organizational changes, outside influences beyond the team's control.

___ The potential for early wins.

Add up the project's score, then consider the following confidence rating guidelines:

90 to 100 – Highly Confident: Proceed

80 to 90 – Confident: Proceed

70 to 80 – Watch: Needs active monitoring

60 to 70 – Concern: Needs active coaching

50 to 60 – Danger: Re-scope before launch

Under 50 – Stop: Do not start as defined

Frustration

Frustration usually creeps in by the second week of training or the middle of the Measure phase of a project. The Black Belt understands what data is needed to identify and investigate root cause issues. A data collection plan has been developed with clear operational definitions. The hard work of collecting the data has begun. Not unlike collecting and crushing grapes to make wine, it is hard, messy work to harvest the information needed to make breakthroughs in process performance. There is often resistance to measuring performance more closely. The Black Belt becomes a lightning rod for the tension and stress that builds around the project. If the Black Belt is not dedicated 100 percent to the project, work from his or her "day job" has accumulated and the frustration grows.

During this period, an active sponsor will have stayed close to the project leader, asking all along the way, "How is it going? How can I help?" At the first sign of slowing progress, the sponsor should call together the managers involved to help reset the priorities of the Black Belt. If the project has been well scoped by the sponsor, it should be focused on a high priority issue that warrants the full-time attention of the Black Belt and 30 percent involvement of team members. The sponsor should help the Black Belt look for "early wins" to show the power of the approach and defuse some of the skepticism that might have built up.

Communicating to and involving those not formally on the project is key. Those are the people who have had to pick up the slack in the daily work, left by those working on the project. (Why should those not working directly on the project want it to succeed? After all, won't their peers get all the credit?) The sponsor needs to recognize the contribution of everyone touched by the project and communicate the benefits that a successful project will have on all involved.

Most European cultures are more collectivist than in the United States, so the notion of picking out Black Belts as elite process improvers is counter-cultural. In the USA, someone who is able "to pull himself up by his boot straps" is to be admired. The individual who overcomes obstacles through hard work and "true grit" is applauded. However, in continental Europe, collective performance is more valued than individual performance. European workers are critical of individuals who stand out as high performers if they "leave the rest behind." After all, those individuals benefited from the group they came from, so they have a duty to strengthen the group. Without countervailing action, Black Belts will be unsuccessful cultural pioneers, the ones with arrows in their backs.

How then, can a company retain the power of the highly trained, dedicated, process improvement specialist, while defusing the cultural forces that build against the project as it progresses? Steps can be taken at the company, department and project level:

1. The business leader has to communicate to everyone the importance and relevance of Six Sigma to the business – all employees, customers and suppliers.
2. A communication plan of regular and frequent messages through all available media should be developed and implemented following a carefully thought through calendar of normal daily activities as well as special events.
3. The project sponsor should speak one-on-one with important opinion leaders to listen to their concerns about their specific project and the initiative in general, and enroll them in the success of the effort.
4. Project leaders should map out the stakeholders (those with a vested interest in the project) and strategize about how best to win over their support.
5. A one-day orientation to Six Sigma should be conducted for all employees (at least those involved as team members) to begin creating a common language of improvement.

A session for department managers should be designed to help them in their role as process owners – the recipients (beneficiaries) of many process changes.

In Europe, time needs to be devoted to managing the context around the projects. The benefits to the business and organization as a whole must be emphasized. The lower the cultural risk to the project leader, the shallower the "valley of despair."

Determination

As root causes start to be identified and "early wins" implemented, the project leader and team start the climb toward success. In this phase, the character of the team leader is crucial. If the company has picked someone with a track record of successfully implementing difficult projects, then he or she will "hunker down" and focus on getting the job done. By pursuing several possible root causes simultaneously, in sub-groups, the team can spread their risk of running into dead ends. Typically, several fruitful avenues emerge and the morale of the team leader and team starts to climb.

Success

It is true that success has many fathers, while failure is an orphan. As solutions develop, are piloted and implemented, people are pleased to be involved and contribute. Success breeds confidence which fuels greater success. The business leader should be sure to recognize the contribution of everyone involved in the project, as well as the project leader.

Care must be taken not to declare victory too soon, before process and organizational controls are in place to maintain the gains. The early involvement of process owners, during the Define and Measure phases, pays off here as the teams transfer ownership for the improvement to the line organization. The sponsor should insist that the team put in place rigorous control measures and validate the expected business result before "certifying" that the project has been successfully completed.

There is an inevitable "valley of despair" that every Black Belt as project leader must face. To the extent that using highly trained and dedicated individuals to drive change is counter-cultural, as it is in Europe, the period of frustration often will be deeper and longer. That makes the sponsor's role in scoping the project even more critical to the project's success. But the business leader, sponsor and project leader all bear responsibility to manage the context in which the project takes place to minimize the political risk of failure. That translates into enrolling the support of key stakeholders.