

‘Quick Wins’ vs the ‘Mile Deep Thinking’ of Six Sigma

by Stephen Walsh



How can we take advantage of a ‘Quick Win’ solution, without compromising the rigour of the Six Sigma DMAICT process?

IMAGINE you have been asked to fill a bath tub with water. You place the plug in its plughole, turn on the taps and, satisfied you have launched the task, you disappear into the kitchen for a cup of tea.

However, on your return to the bathroom to inspect progress, you discover that there is no water in the bath tub! As you look into the tub you see that the plug has been displaced from the hole. What do you do? Do you pop the plug back in firmly? Or do you launch a six-month investigation before trying again? Clearly you would stick the plug back in, pausing to check that the water isn’t knocking it out again. The reason for the empty bathtub would appear to be obvious (although the reason for the plug’s displacement may require some investigation) and you would get on with it.

If, however, you peered into the tub, saw that no water was collecting there despite the plug being in place and the water flowing freely, you would then probably rub your chin and ponder the reason for the water’s absence. That the tub is empty is plain to see – *why* it is empty is not evident and would require further investigation. Known problem . . . as yet unknown solution!

A trite example perhaps, but the dilemma that often faces Green and Black Belt project leaders is that of addressing what appears to be an obvious fix, when their training has counselled against acting on ‘gut feel’.

The very name of ‘Quick Fix’ or ‘Quick Win’ seems to be derogatory of such impulsive action. Senior management too, are pressuring for results and yet the Belt *knows* he or she has to conduct a thorough analysis, following an extensive measure phase.

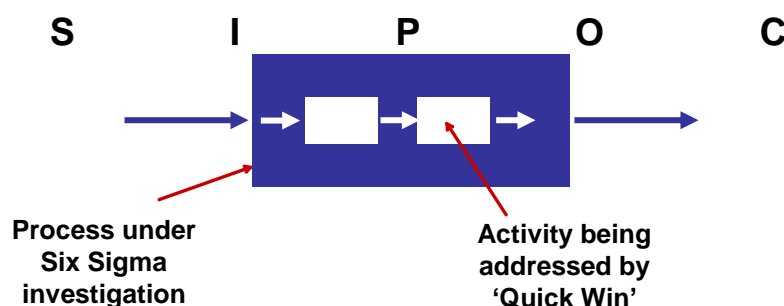
So are ‘Quick Wins’ legitimate? If so, are there any guidelines for recognising when a solution fix might be implemented, even though the project is still in the measure or analyse phase?

Here are just a few thoughts on the matter – by no means a definitive answer, but perhaps of help to the troubled Belt.

CHALLENGE

 the proposed Quick Win.

- Is the solution based on *belief* or real data?
- Does the part of the process to be changed by the Quick Win solution reside in its entirety within the start and finish of the process under Six Sigma investigation (i.e. does it receive its inputs from within the boundaries of the process and likewise are its 'customers' within those same boundaries – in other words, any change must not impact negatively outside of that process).



- Will the 'Quick Win' make any measurable difference perceivable by the customer of the process under investigation, i.e. lower cost, shorter lead time or fewer errors delivered?
- Is the failure in the process that the solution addresses absolutely intolerable, e.g. it is very broken!?
- Are you sure that the solution will definitely NOT make things worse? In other words, what is the RISK of introducing more and new sources of variation into the overall process under investigation?
- Will a local change to the activity obviate the data already collected as part of the 'measure' phase?
- How expensive is the 'Quick Win' solution?
- Will the 'Quick Win' extend the larger project timescales?

Remember, any 'Quick Win' implementations will change the process under investigation, therefore the SIPOC, Y2X etc. for the Six Sigma project must be revisited and amended.

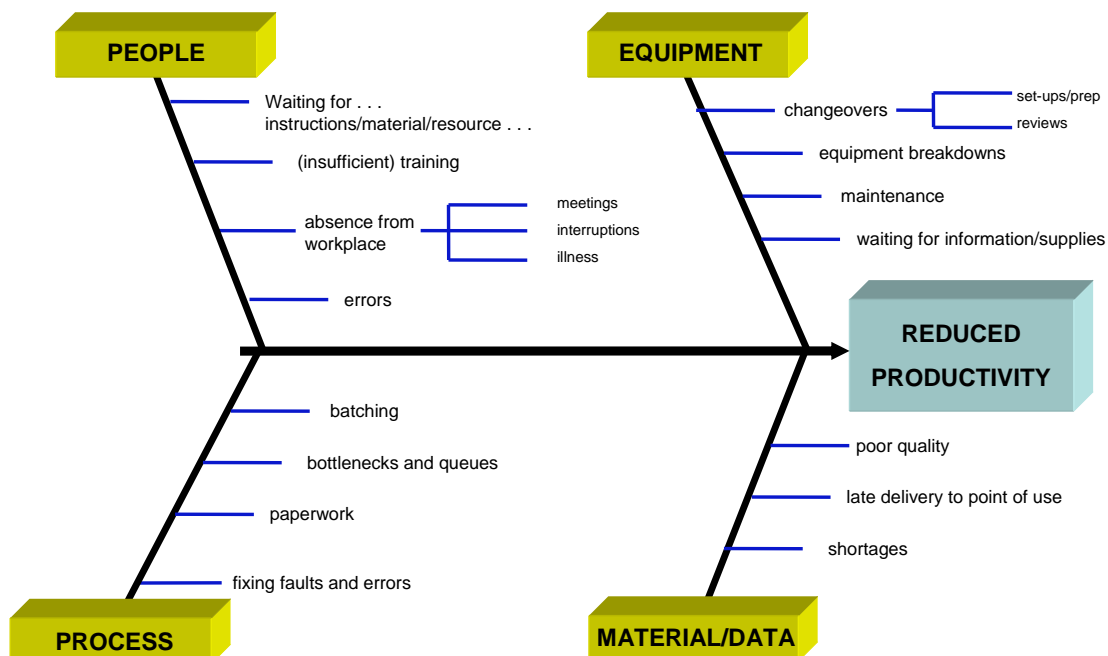
Possible Sources of 'Quick Wins'

A comprehensive and detailed PROCESS MAP will often highlight evident 'breaks' in the process and could draw attention to candidate activities for a 'Quick Win'.

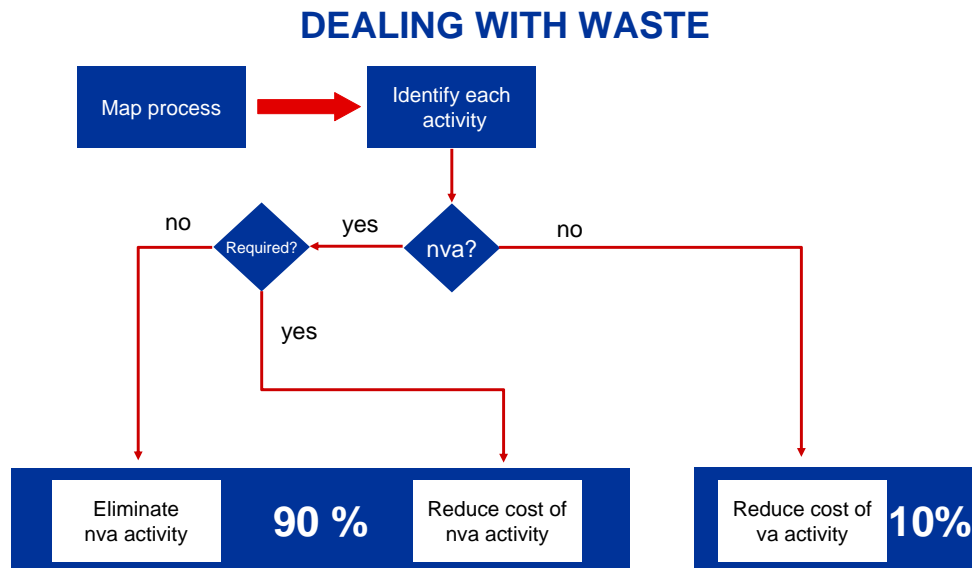
The map will show up process complexity, areas of non-value adding activity, areas where errors occur more frequently, bottlenecks and process imbalances:

- **A Moment of Truth Analysis** may highlight severe customer dissatisfaction.
- **Cycle Time and Flow Analysis** will show up obvious bottlenecks – but beware! Sorting a local bottleneck does not necessarily improve the overall output of a process.
- **Value Add versus Non-value Add Analysis** will identify waste in a system, which shows itself as cost and usually extended overall lead times, rework and rejects in the process.

Fishbone Diagram for lost time (extending process lead time) or increased cost of process



All of these causes illustrated in the Fishbone Diagram are sources of variation in cost and in the time taken for process inputs to be converted to outputs, and may present themselves as opportunities for 'Quick Win', where a 'fix' will not adversely affect any other part of the process.



Identifying sources of error is obviously a part of the Six Sigma approach. Conducting process FMEAs can sometimes point to 'Quick Wins' by highlighting the 'Big SODs' (i.e. **S**everity – **O**ccurance – **D**etectability) and conducting 'Quick Win' changes through:

- Improving the general competence of staff
- Poka Yoke
- Better Standard Operating Procedures
- Sharing knowledge of the process requirements between internal customers (i.e. Who **IS** my customer and do I **UNDERSTAND** what they want?)

IN CONCLUSION, do not shy away from implementing 'Quick Win' solutions within a Six Sigma project. The principle of avoiding instinctive gut feel, though, remains a paramount instruction – even rapid, small and inexpensive changes have to be predicated upon sound data-driven decisions. Remember too, that any benefits claimed as a result of the 'Quick Win' should be noted as being part of the greater project activity.

Often the execution of 'Quick Wins' will remove the dross of waste activity in a process that will actually make clear the remaining process and allow the deeper investigative approach of DMAICT to proceed with greater focus and impact. Process and data analytical techniques complement each other very well.