

## More than a Plaque on the Wall: How Accreditation of Belts gives Business Benefits

By Stephen Walsh

Learning the tools of Six Sigma requires huge individual commitment and not unnaturally many people seek some recognition for that.

Six Sigma is about driving business performance, typically through improvement projects, and acknowledging the individual need for reward is more a means to an end, not the end in itself. It can be neglected.

**Why then should you consider accrediting Belts formally through assessment and certification? A certificate recognising the competence of an individual as a Black or Green Belt is more than just a plaque on the wall. The process of accreditation offers a number of very important benefits not only for the project leader (the Belt), but for the business and for its Six Sigma deployment.**

A formal, in-house accreditation process is important for a number of reasons:

- it is a part of the *learning* process
- it provides standards of competence
- it provides individual recognition
- it supports project-based activity
- it supports the development of Six Sigma maturity

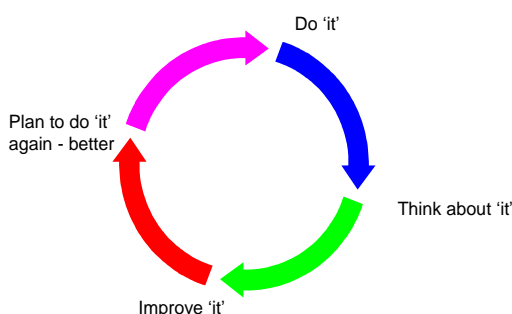
### Accreditation enhances learning

There are two dimensions to competence that accreditation should assess:

1. **knowledge** – usually measured through testing
2. **experience** – as evidenced by the completion of projects in which the tools of Six Sigma are exercised

An accreditation process should include **formative** and **summative** elements of assessment. Summative assessment means measuring knowledge and experience against a pre-determined standard and the results count towards accreditation. A test, for example, measures knowledge and typically carries a fail/pass boundary (though some may argue a 'not passed yet' philosophy). A project will be assessed via a written document, backed up with a discussion with the Belt and often the Champion.

### Kolb Learning Cycle



Formative assessment is the implementation of a coaching feedback loop between an experienced Belt (a Black or Master Black Belt) and the candidate.

The feedback loop is the active application of the Kolb Learning Cycle, by which people learn.

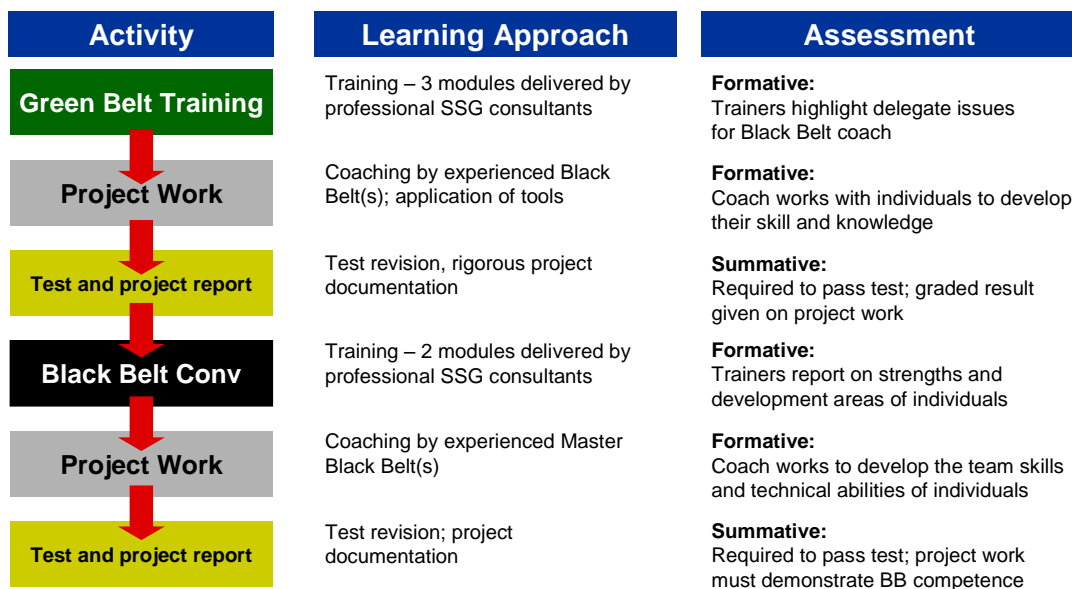
Both summative and formative assessment enhance learning because of this feedback loop. Learning is encouraged, measured, reviewed and revisited. By establishing a peer group support mechanism, with coaching input from a Master Black Belt, the delegates can enhance their understanding of the learning material and so the application of the DMAICT toolset will be accelerated and the approach will become more embedded.

### Standard of competence

It is unfortunate that there is no universal standard for competence in Six Sigma. Consequently and ironically, there is considerable variation in the ability of Black Belts and of Green Belts. A review of the course contents from different providers demonstrates this – for example Green Belt courses lasting anything from five to ten days, with and without statistical rigour. Anyone who has interviewed for the post of Black Belt will be able to bear witness to the impression that there are ‘shades of black’.

By setting up an accreditation process, a business can create an internal standard of competence. This presents consistency, describes a minimum level of competence required by the business and therefore gives management the confidence in its Six Sigma project resource.

## THE ACCREDITATION PROCESS



### Individual recognition

‘Six Sigma’ is challenging and stimulating. Invariably results will be achieved through the personal efforts of the Belts managing their project teams, which is often over and above that demanded by the day job. In the case of a Green Belt, a part-time project leader, it will be as *well* as the day job with competing priorities.

A certificate acknowledges this effort, as well as symbolising the special status that a Green or Black Belt has achieved.

It is worth raising the profile of the newly qualified Belts by holding an awards ceremony, which senior managers attend to listen to project presentations and applaud the Belts for their achievement.

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## **Project activity is supported**

A Belt undergoing accreditation will be required to submit at least one project report and sometimes two. This does provide an additional motivation to the individual to drive the project, as no-one wants to be seen to have 'failed' at a personal level. The quality of work on the project benefits from accreditation because of the formalised coaching provided as part of the feedback loop discussed earlier, as does the quality of reporting of the project.

The requirement for project assessment as part of accreditation will ensure that projects are associated with the training of Belts. This ought to be a pre-requisite of training, but is not always followed.

## **Accreditation helps to develop Six Sigma maturity**

Accreditation causes a company to establish standards of competence, which are then measured and the measurement process creates learning and motivation to complete projects. It can be seen, therefore, how an organisation can use accreditation to underpin the rigour of the Six Sigma process, strengthening its deployment and even accelerating it.

Six Sigma is about achieving results through project-based improvement activity. It embraces measurement and analysis to make fact-based decisions that lead to sound conclusions about root causes of variation in a process and so to changes that will make a difference. Accreditation, is in a sense one system for measuring progress by measuring a key 'X' in the deployment process – namely the individuals who have stood up to the challenge of becoming a Six Sigma Belt.