

Training Review : Six Sigma Group's Awareness Seminars

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Six Sigma continues to gain traction in Europe, enjoying wider press coverage and grabbing the attention of Senior Business Leaders in all industry sectors. For those seeking to understand the methodology, tools and applications of Six Sigma, there is a plethora of information available although gathering material that is relevant to your organisation can be both time consuming and confusing. There are also services available to help the researcher: public training courses are held regularly, but this can be a costly method of information gathering. Whilst being equally expensive, conferences are a great opportunity to meet practitioners and service providers alike, but they can also fall victim to the 'beauty parade' of self promoting case-studies and vendors.

There is an alternative: The Six Sigma Group run Six Sigma Awareness Seminars, designed to help busy managers understand Six Sigma within the context of their own organisation. The Six Sigma Group is based just outside Rugby, minutes from the M1, with excellent in-house training facilities set in picturesque Bourton-on-Dunsmore. In this four hour session, Stephen Walsh and Stuart Smith, both Directors of the organisation, provide an overview of the Six Sigma improvement process, the roles and responsibilities of Champions and Belts, and enable the visitors to take their own view on the applicability within their own organisation.

I attended one of these Awareness Seminars recently and was thoroughly impressed, especially with the unambiguous delivery of complex concepts with such lucidity. This was not an in-depth training session on tools, rather an overview of the methodology and terminology: a "Get By In Six Sigma". Walsh's animated introduction captured the group's attention immediately, introducing the central concept of Six Sigma – Variation – and how it impacts business processes. Smith followed, dispelling the myth that Six Sigma is only applicable to high volume manufacturing, discussing examples from a broad range of sectors and industries, which is important as the attendees had diverse experience and the industries represented were as varied as the Six Sigma Group's customers. The activities were fun, interactive and fit for purpose, demonstrating how communication and management – whilst obviously very important – may not be enough: the Six Sigma professional must also be aware of providing objectivity and awareness of processes that surround us every day, as well as cultivating an understanding for challenging the constraints and making data-driven decisions based on root cause analysis of the problem.

Rather than selling Six Sigma as the new panacea for all business problems, Walsh and Smith were careful to remain judicious about what Six Sigma is, and is not. "It is an evolution of thought" explained Walsh "which incorporates the historical theories and experience of Deming, Taguchi, TQM, and more. It's not the tools that are new, but the way they have been packaged into a rigorous project methodology."

The difference between Six Sigma and Design for Six Sigma was explained in a clear fashion, and the statistical elements such as standard deviation, variation and spread were effortlessly translated – ideal for newcomers to the subject. The Six Sigma Group has already had a direct input to advancing the evolution of the methodology: the DMAIC roadmap (Define, Measure, Analyse, Improve and Control) has been enhanced with a pre-define stage called 'Recognise' and a final knowledge sharing phase called 'Transfer'.

"Recognise, is all about prioritising opportunities, and Transfer is about sharing the knowledge that has been gained" said Smith. Project Selection and Knowledge Management are key elements to the infrastructure of deploying Six Sigma, but by making them extra phases in the methodology, they are proactively encouraged and documented.

This short course is an excellent overview of the Six Sigma improvement process, terms, tools, and roles to help understand and assess the applicability of Six Sigma to a business, and the facilitators' energy, approach and delivery of training is superb.