A n organization can seek self-improvement in many ways. There are endless philosophies, quick fixes, “seven-step” programs and sure-fire, can’t-miss ideas. However, none have a history that can match the proven success of Six Sigma methodologies when it comes to providing opportunities for continuous improvement.

Not only does Six Sigma allow a company to achieve continuous improvement and create a data-driven workplace culture, it also provides opportunities for personal and professional growth for employees. Participating in the Six Sigma program encourages leaders, future leaders and employees to approach business differently. It can change the way people think, act and solve everyday problems. So not only can you address your biggest pain points, you can make your team stronger at the same time.

Case Study

Alta Resources completed a Six Sigma project for a large consumer-packaged goods (CPG) client. The focus of the project was to improve Top Box email customer satisfaction scores, which were at 42%. The lower CSAT scores indicated an opportunity to improve consumer experience and increase the customer lifetime value to the client. The goal was to increase the email CSAT scores to 60%, positively impacting the customer experience and better aligning with Top Box phone performance.

Shortly before the Six Sigma discussions with the client began, an Alta Resources employee, Kathy, had her yearly performance review. One of the goals that came out of this review was...
earning a Six Sigma Green Belt. Kathy was tasked with seeking out an opportunity to lead a project. She learned of a client project focused on the Top Box email CSAT scores and with her background felt she would be a good fit to lead it.

To address properly the CSAT score project, Kathy had to assemble a project team. “One of the first challenges was identifying the right people for the project team. A diverse group was needed—diversity in thought was absolutely necessary,” says Kathy. Key among the members was an analyst who could go through the 18 months of email data they had. No less important, however, were client partners, leaders from other teams and frontline email specialists who performed the actual hands-on, customer contact.

Following the Six Sigma DMAIC methodology (define – measure – analyze – improve – control), the project team used the first three stages to determine the root causes that were statistically related to the Top Box email CSAT performance results. A wide array of factors were found to affect email CSAT scores, especially Top Box results. However, one factor stood out as the most impactful—variability in the performance of email specialists. A large majority of issues could be traced back to this frontline position responsible for customer interaction.

**What Is Six Sigma?**

The Six Sigma methodology is a defined problem-solving approach that focuses on reducing variation, defects and waste in processes, thereby improving the value of services and/or support to your customers and clients. It provides a structured, disciplined process designed to create a culture of continuous improvement. Originally created for the manufacturing environment by Motorola in the 1980s, Six Sigma became popularized in the 1990s when GE chairman and CEO Jack Welch embraced the methodology. He said, “Perhaps the biggest but most unheralded benefit of Six Sigma is its capacity to develop a cadre of great leaders.”

identified, the task became finding possible solutions and figuring out what impact, if any, they would have elsewhere. From an efficiency standpoint, using a Pugh Matrix, the team also had to decide which solutions would provide the biggest bang for the buck.

The process often produced results that were not obvious in the beginning, and many challenged the team’s initial beliefs. “A lot of what we thought in the beginning—our gut feelings—turned out to be wrong,” says Kathy. Again, team management was essential for her. Ensuring all ideas were represented, vetted and given their proper due was vital in keeping the project team operating in concert with each other.

**Solutions**

With the problems acknowledged and solutions identified, Kathy went about putting them into practice. Client team leaders were targeted first. Once Kathy presented the Six Sigma findings to the leadership and had their support, it was easier to affect change on the frontline. “A key aspect was getting people to buy into change, changing people’s mindsets,” she says.

Because of the large potential impact, addressing the variability in email specialist performance as a solution was priority. In addition to being impactful, any changes could be made quickly and did not rely on outside factors or resources from the client. The project team implemented the following:

1. **Modified the hiring process:** After reaching out to other client teams, Kathy and the team created a new hiring process for email specialists. As part of interviews, candidates went through a customer-interaction email simulation. Feedback was provided and another simulation was done. In this way, candidates were informed of expectations and recruiters could see how they handled feedback. Both talent and temperament/attitude were being tested to see if applicants would be a good fit.

2. **Instituted bi-monthly email calibration sessions:** Every two weeks the entire email team would meet and review email responses. Team members would openly discuss and critique interactions. At first, the email team was skeptical. However, as meetings progressed, so too did employee buy-in. It was discovered that peer comments and acceptance were very powerful in improving email specialists’ behaviors and abilities.

3. **Improved tasking strategy:** Workflows were modified to ensure emails were reviewed on a regular basis (outside of the calibration sessions), and just as important, feedback was given to allow for continuous
improvement of consumer interactions.

4. Employed additional trainings: With an emphasis on email reviews, problem/improvement areas became easily identifiable. Those findings were then used to target specific issues with new training programs. In this manner, weaknesses are continually being addressed and every new email specialist brought aboard is stronger than the last.

Once the email specialists were addressed, the project team moved on to the other solutions, again addressing matters in a “biggest bang for the buck” mentality.

The Results

After the solutions were implemented, the improvements had to be statistically validated. This required the project team to go back and repeat the same tasks they originally performed for the analyze phase when identifying root causes. The goal was to obtain the same type of data for before and after comparisons. New procedures were documented and controls were defined in the control phase. The results are as follows: Top Box email CSAT performance scores improved from 42% to 51%, resulting in increased customer loyalty and additional sales for the CPG client of $762,542.

Note: The numbers above reflect the implementation of only the improvements and changes centered on email specialist performance. As a first step, this 9% increase in scores signals more improvement in the future will be possible as other solutions are put into practice.

As the project lead, Kathy was required to report on the findings of the CSAT project to several groups. First, as part of an ongoing communication plan, she presented the information to the client. In order to earn her Six Sigma Green Belt certification, Kathy had to also report and defend her findings, in great detail, to Juran Global. In addition to those audiences, Kathy had to present the results to Alta’s Quality Council.

In Her Own Words

Once the project was completed, Kathy reflected on and evaluated the learnings: “I learned a lot throughout the entire project. The biggest thing, probably, was the importance of being disciplined and the consistency of process.”

Some of the lasting lessons Kathy identifies include:
• Making yourself vulnerable is not a bad thing. Being open to questions and asking your own questions is valuably important.
• Using the resources and people you have access to in a way that caters to their talents and strengths will lead to the best, most efficient results.
• Constructing a diverse team versed in a variety of business disciplines and experience is an absolute necessity.
• Consumer feedback is a window to their experience and can potentially affect a client’s bottom line.
• Knowledge is transferable. Takeaways from one project/process are often applicable to others.
• Communication is key. I was a good communicator before working on this project, but I became even better—I had to—by the time the project was done.
• Never underestimate the need for preparation. How smooth the road to success is depends greatly how well one prepares.

The Importance of Six Sigma

No organization can afford to sit on its hands when it comes to business practices and employee development. To do so invites stagnation and a poorly prepared workforce. The Six Sigma methodology combats these issues by allowing for continuous improvement in both areas. It also promotes the growth and development of any organization’s greatest assets—people. The lessons provided from leading a Six Sigma project make your people stronger. They gain professional and personal growth and experience. Your company benefits from a stronger, more informed and well-versed employee ... a future leader.

Six Sigma SOCAP Session

Interested in earning your Six Sigma White Belt Certification? Register for the Alta Resources’ “Six Sigma White Belt Training Workshop” led by Mark Strassburg, Lean Six Sigma Black Belt (Juran Global certified). The workshop takes place on Wed., April 25, the day after the SOCAP Professional Development Forum in Baltimore. Cost is $125 to attend. Space is limited.

Mark Strassburg is the quality director for Alta Resources, a leading provider of customer-related business process outsourcing for many of the world’s best-known brands in a variety of industries, including consumer-packaged goods, health insurance and entertainment. With 18 years of experience, he leads the Alta Resources’ Quality Team responsible for process improvement, quality assurance and workforce management. Mark is a Lean Six Sigma Black Belt, certified through Juran Global.