

Take Care of Your Talent

Develop Your Belts

By Amy Tan & Dr Uwe H Kaufmann

Against the common belief, statistical knowledge is not a criterion for selecting your Belts. However, the capability to acquire new technical skills, to apply these skills successfully is an important prerequisite. More important is the aptitude to involve, motivate, coach and train people, to lead and manage teams towards delivering results and to communicate effectively with different levels in the organisation.

A study by iSixSigma Magazine^① about the importance of different skills and characteristics for a successful Black Belt was showing that Communication Skills is by far the most important requirement. Leadership Skills came in second and Technical Skills third. The question for the importance of Soft Skills for different roles in the Six Sigma deployment was answered by 72% for Green Belts and 99% for Black Belts with important or very important (5-point scale). Soft Skills include Communication, Collaboration, Team Leadership, Change Management, Time Management as most important to the success of the Belt.

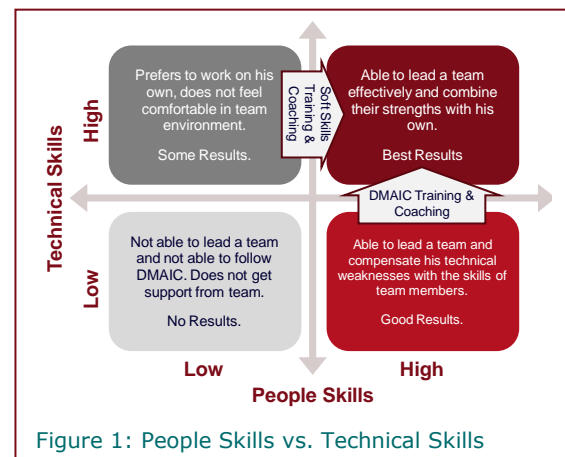


Figure 1: People Skills vs. Technical Skills

Out of all 900+ respondents of this survey, more than 90% said that Soft Skills are equally important or more important than Technical Skills; for more than 65% it is much harder to attain these skills. Yet, Soft Skills training is usually much less than 20% of the Belt Training curriculum and almost never present in coaching support sessions. In other words, Soft Skills are taught in a few companies but hardly coached.

If Soft Skills are vital to the success of our Belts on the one hand and not easy to acquire on the other hand, why is this not reflected in the way we develop our Belts?

To many companies it is apparent, that Soft Skills contribute more to the success of Lean Six Sigma projects than Technical Skills. However, only 20% or less of their Black Belt training agenda is dedicated to Soft Skills. Moreover, Black Belt coaching is almost always limited to Technical Skills.

Please take a list of the “not so successful Belts” of your company and answer the following question for each Belt “Is the Belt not able to deliver results as expected due to lack of Technical Skills or Soft Skills?”^②

Soft Skills Needed

The list of soft skills can be very long. The above mentioned study by iSixSigma Magazine suggests looking into Communication Skills first. Our understanding is that Communication Skills is, on the one hand, a headline for many different skills and it is part of many Soft Skills on the other hand. Black Belts – and similarly Green Belts in a smaller degree – need to communicate with three levels in the organisation:

1. Communication with the Management Level including the whole Management Team, especially Sponsors, often CFO as well as Deployment Leaders and Coach (MBB) is key for making Lean Six Sigma successful.
2. Communication with Peers is equally important. It involves sharing and mutual support with Peer Belts as well as using the Peer Network for the benefit of project work.
3. Communication with own Team Members and other resources needed is essential for all project work.

These types of communication need different strategies

Not all of these skills are to be taught and coached to Belts. There are three categories of skill sets to be considered:

- a) Self Discovery
- b) Team Management
- c) Stakeholder Management

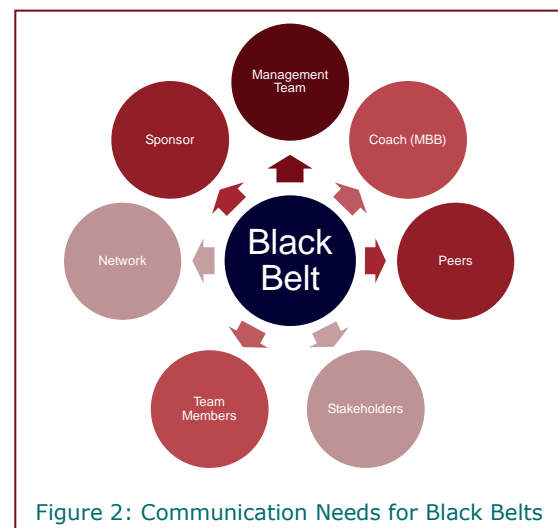
Self Discovery skills are rather to enable the Belt to learn about his strengths and weaknesses, to explore his behavioural preferences and its influence on team and environment. Profiling tools like DISC can be helpful in this process.

Team Management tools include Communication Skills, Facilitation Skills, Motivation, Team Dynamics & Effectiveness like Dealing with Resistance and Conflict Management as well as Coaching Skills like Listening and Giving Feedback[®].

Stakeholder Management needs Influencing Skills, Negotiation Skills, Stakeholder Analysis, Dealing with Resistance.

On the one hand, it seems like an overwhelming task to master all these tools. Not many people are really equipped with these skills when they start their journey into Lean Six Sigma or similar development programmes.

On the other hand, it becomes apparent that no “standard” intervention is suitable to develop all these skills since it depends on personal styles and preconditions as well as company and culture-driven factors.



Developing Soft Skills

Planning your Lean Six Sigma rollout should include planning for soft skills development of your Belts. This development should start before the rollout, should be interweaved with

Lean Six Sigma training interventions and should involve follow-up steps alongside the project work.

Setting the stage

Apart from assigning a sponsor for each project, it can be beneficial to define a **Mentor** for all or some of the Lean Six Sigma Belts. The mentor's responsibility is to take care of the Belt, his development and his success in the organisation. A mentor is normally not involved in the Lean Six Sigma project. However, sponsor and mentor can be the same person. In order to get the most out of this relationship, mentor and Belt should be introduced to the mentoring process⁴. Upon establishing a more "formal" relationship a "personal gap analysis" should be done to identify development needs as part of the personal development plan.

Starting the Journey

After the first meetings with sponsor and team, the Belt usually faces the first hurdles. He may recognise lack of support by sponsor due to other priorities, unpleasant team dynamics due to the Forming and Storming phases the team has to go through. Standard lean Six Sigma training does usually not tackle these issues.

The best time for introducing **Soft Skills Development**⁵ to Belts is by and large after having started project work and after having received the first session of training. Only by then Belts know enough about Lean Six Sigma to be able to picture their role in the journey. Only by then they may have experienced some short-comings to be able to appreciate the additional support offered to them.

This Soft Skills training should be structured around the needs for Belts, i.e. a substitute of customised training by standard off-the-shelf training for team development, negotiation skills etc. may be suboptimal. It is usually between three and five days long and can be delivered in one or two sessions. It best includes some self-discovery systems like DISC or EG to help identifying personal preferences and draw relevant conclusions regarding ones relationship with others. This intervention shall be highly interactive and give enough room for discovery in real team set ups.

The mentor should chat or meet with his ward frequently to help him in his personal development adventure. Having identified milestones and KPIs along the development process helps to structure the mentoring process and speeds up the learning curve.

Follow Up

As the project work is under full steam, the project team has probably "normed" already and is "performing" to deliver results. However, concluding that the development of your Belt has finished successfully may be a mistake. Only by going through the experience of leading a Lean Six Sigma project your Belt may have discovered personal weaknesses and further development needs. Together with his mentor, the Belt should review his development plan and draw conclusions about further interventions needed.

Conclusion

Belt development is a nice side-effect of any Lean Six Sigma journey. Done well it delivers an indication for your next generation of leaders - on top of project results.

Studies have shown that taking care of the “Soft Skills” of Belts increases the impact of their projects by a large margin and reduces the cycle time for projects significantly. This consequently leads to increased acceptance in the organisation and hence a longer tenure.

About the Authors

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Additional Information, Articles & Tools

- ① iSixSigma Magazine: [The Hard Truth About Soft Skills](#), January/February 2008
- ② COE: [Take Care of Your Talent – Or Someone Else Will](#)
- ③ COE: [Manager as Coach](#)
- ④ COE: [A Little Guidebook on Mentoring](#)
- ⑤ COE: [Enabling People for Success](#)