

Is Lean Six Sigma Killing Innovation?

Many people argue that the procedural nature of Lean Six Sigma is killing innovation. While this might be true if a company obsessively pursues Lean Six Sigma, I say Lean Six Sigma accelerates innovation.

Yes, Lean Six Sigma is very procedural, but as improvement teams peel away the layers of delay, defects and deviation that have created a maze of workarounds, rework loops and scrap, it becomes easy to see how the process *should work*. Once Lean Six Sigma teams clear away the clutter, innovations become obvious.

And Lean Six Sigma can cut unnecessary costs of waste and rework by 25% or more. This frees up money to innovate. It releases employees from constant firefighting to actually have bright idea.

Having lived through the *reengineering* craze in the 1990s, I can tell you that it's almost impossible to redesign a business process without first simplifying it. All too often, reengineering teams overlook critical aspects of the existing process leading to failed projects. And as Michael Hammer later revealed, he had no idea how important the human aspect of change would be in the success or failure of reengineering.

Ideas Are Overrated

Eric Ries, author of *The Lean Startup*, says that all of the innovation rhetoric is wrong. "There's no empirical evidence that 'being in the right place at the right time with the right idea' is true. In fact, there's actually tons of evidence that it isn't true." What's the secret? Successful entrepreneurs have a *process for adapting* to changing situations on the fly. (Hint: Lean Six Sigma is a process for adapting.) "The best entrepreneurship happens in low-stakes environments where no one is paying attention, like Mark Zuckerberg's dorm room at Harvard."

The Breakthrough Myth

In *Wired*, Clive Thompson revealed that "The assumption is that breakthroughs are inherently surprising, so it takes special genius to spot one coming." Not true, Clive says. He quotes Bill Buxton, principal researcher at Microsoft: "Anything...that's going to be a billion-dollar industry—has already been around for 10 years." Billion dollar ideas, he says, have *surprising obviousness*.

So how does innovation really work? Look for concepts that are already successful in one field and bring them together in another. The best innovations may just be compositions of existing ideas. The "pinch and zoom" function of smartphones, for example, was developed in 1983. Apple engineers incorporated it to the iPhone. Innovation starts with a prototype that continuously evolves based on customer feedback into something remarkable. The first idea is rarely genius; it's the tuned product or service that eventually breaks out into widespread awareness.

Thompson says: "Evolution trumps revolution, and things happen slowly."

Evolutionaries and Revolutionaries

From my research into neuro-linguistics, I can tell you that 30 people out of 100 like to blow things up and start over. They are the revolutionaries. They can't follow a process; they only want to invent new ones whether they work or not. They hate Lean Six Sigma. They have to change every 1-2 years.

65 people out of every 100 are evolutionaries. They like to improve things. They like Lean Six Sigma because it makes sense to them.

This battle between innovators and improvers has been going on for as long as I can remember, but the problem is that each thinks they have *the one right answer*. I say not true, improvement leads to innovation and innovation leads to improvement.

And most innovation isn't really that innovative. It's a process of combining existing ideas, notions, metaphors, parts, tools or whatever into a surprisingly obvious way to solve an unmet need or problem. Most innovation is actually evolution. Yes, some pure innovation exists, but it may languish in a lab for a long time before it hits the mainstream.

My advice: Simplify, streamline and optimize existing business operations using Lean Six Sigma to boost productivity and profitability. As Lean Six Sigma clears away the clutter, look for ways to redesign or reengineer the business. Listen to the voice of the customer; what are they asking for that doesn't yet exist? How can you cobble together a solution out of off-the-shelf ideas, parts or whatever? How can you test it in a low risk environment with existing customers and tune it up before releasing it on the marketplace?

We will always need innovators and improvers, but the fight over which one should reign supreme is an enormous waste of energy. When innovation wins, companies lose because of sluggish, error-prone delivery. When improvement wins, companies lose because they aren't finding new solutions for their customers.

Haven't you waited long enough to start using both innovation and improvement to maximize your company's impact? Or are you going to keep fighting over the "right way" to do things and squander the opportunities available to you.

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