



# Moving from Technical to Tactical: The Key to Success with Lean & Six Sigma

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Making operational improvements in any enterprise is hard work. Making it stick in the long run is even tougher. Too often organizations spend a tremendous amount of time and money on these initiatives and after experiencing initial improvements find that they have failed to sustain the full benefits over time. They either leave money on the table or backslide into the “business as usual” methods that created the problems in the first place.

*A 2007 Industry Week/ MPI Census of Manufacturers research report indicates that only 2 percent of responding companies fully achieved their operational improvement objectives and only 24 percent achieved significant results.*

What are the underlying causes of such disappointing results? The Society of Manufacturing Engineers 2007 annual survey points to six obstacles:

- Middle management buy-in
- Employee resistance
- Lack of crisis
- Lack of implementation
- Supervisory resistance
- Backsliding

Clearly, most of the above are the result of ineffective management and supervisory skills, which are more often called “soft” skills, which we call “**tactical**” skills. This was confirmed in a iSixSigma’s 2008 research report entitled “*The Hard Truth About Soft Skills*”. This survey found that of the top 10 skills and characteristics required for Six Sigma success only two were technical and the remaining eight were tactical. These crucial tactical skills consisted of leadership, communication, interpersonal, change agent, listening, project management, facilitation, and motivates / influencing skills. It also found that when companies provided training in these tactical skills as part of the six sigma program, it doubled the number of companies who said Six Sigma achieved the desired results.



A recent McKinsey Quarterly report confirms this assertion. Quoting From Lean to Lasting: Making Operational Improvement Stick - “analytical solutions to operating problems abound in lean and six sigma tool kits and companies train selected individuals, or hire externally, who know how to apply them. Unfortunately, these experts often do not possess the skill or desire and are not prepared to develop the Managers and Supervisors to work and lead in new and better ways. They cannot build the organizational capabilities that permanent change requires. Initiative fatigue and even distrust may set in. Efficiency gains fizzle out as the black belts, lean sensei, consultants and other change agents move on to other projects. Neglecting the soft skills components of an operational improvement initiative can delay or even derail it”.

From these findings, it is clear why most operational improvement projects fail to deliver over time! Although the known critical success factors are 80% tactical and 20% technical, the conventional emphasis during implementation tends to be on the technical rather than the tactical. It is ironic that organizations will typically press ahead to analyze, restructure and improve their work processes while ignoring the up front skills and behaviors required to succeed.

So why don't more companies make their top priority in Lean and Six Sigma efforts the training, development and implementation of these very important tactical skills with their line leaders? Perhaps it is because technical approaches are objective, straight forward, and impersonal. It is certainly easier for companies to technically identify and analyze the various steps in the operational processes that cause lost time, inefficiencies and poor performance than to identify, analyze and improve the tactical skills and behaviors of managers and supervisors.

It is simply human nature to avoid organizational assessments that might lead to confrontations. However, the challenge of any improvement effort is to resist both 1) the need to “do something” immediately using technical techniques and 2) avoid a serious self-examination of the tactical skill effectiveness of management. It is clear that the first order of business is to establish and strengthen the organizational skill set most essential to operational improvement success. Technical skills are built on the foundation of effective tactical skills.

For example, using the tactical skill of Leadership, it is imperative that leaders set clear and specific performance expectations before the tools and methods of Six Sigma and Lean are applied to give birth to new processes, capacities and standards. Otherwise, these new process innovations may not be implemented properly if managers or supervisors cannot understand and implement the new performance expectations. This idea is simple in concept but difficult to implement because, as Deming proclaimed, the system is the problem. Regarding leadership, it is the management system.



As you begin your Six Sigma and Lean journey, I encourage you to ask yourself these questions. Are you planning on applying the DMAIC (Define, Measure, Analyze, Improve and Control) steps to the leadership process? Are you similarly going to apply them to the critical communications system? The above research should lead you to respond “yes” to both and to first establish the objective of creating an effective Management Operating System (MOS) that defines, supports and drives the essential tactical skills.

A word of caution is appropriate here. If the MOS is simply viewed as the collection of tools, controls and metrics an organization uses to manage operations, then that is all it will deliver. A MOS void of the tactical skills and behaviors tends to result in a system incapable of achieving full operational potential. It will be a system more likely to foster resistance, backsliding, and a lack of buy-in that ultimately results in an erosion of the improvements achieved. A correctly developed and implemented MOS will efficiently drive both the technical and tactical processes of management essential to the success of any operational improvement effort.

As a further example, let’s take the tactical skill of Leadership and examine the key attributes the MOS should support. The tactical skills of effective leadership include resource planning, goal clarity, proactive involvement, work assignment, follow-up, performance feedback, accountability, and problem solving. Management must understand the current process by which these skills are utilized.

- First, **Define** the leadership process by laying out the tools and controls that support and drive these skills. Do they exist? Do they reinforce and strengthen the specific leadership behaviors the organization expects? Is there compliance? As the leadership process is laid out, understand the specific expectations the organization has defined regarding the behaviors it expects in demonstrating these skills. Are they documented and have they been communicated and understood?
- Next, **Measure** the effectiveness of each manager or supervisor with respect to performance. No opinions, just metrics. Operational metrics are good, both performance and cost, e.g. productivity, service, quality, safety. In addition, meeting effectiveness scores, problem identification and resolution attainment, system utilization percentage and expectations communicated are also good indicators.
- Then, **Analyze** the leadership process and look for disconnects where the tools do not drive and deliver the expected behaviors. Also, analyze and evaluate first-hand the strengths and weaknesses of each manager and supervisor regarding these skills by evaluating them “live” in the operation. See how they demonstrate, or not, these skills.
- **Improve** the leadership process first by clearly defining and articulating the role and the specific behaviors the organization wants its managers and supervisors to demonstrate. Train and develop these skills in the classroom for conceptual understanding. Then immediately move out into the operation and coach them through the implementation. Continue immediate evaluation and feedback until the right behavior is demonstrated for the desired result. Implementation is achieved only when the behavior is changed.
- Finally, **Control** the behavior by putting in place those tools in the Management Operating System that require these behaviors to be demonstrated and measured daily.



The parting thought here is that the technical skills in Six Sigma and Lean that improve quality, eliminate waste and reduce variability in operations should be comprehensively applied to the MOS. Moreover, history suggests there should be greater effort spent on improving these tactical skills since they are even more critical to success and sustainability.

In conclusion, a permanent culture change is only brought about through behavior change, and a behavior change is only brought about through an implementation of the right leadership, communication, and other essential tactical skills. It is a proven fact that implementing tactical skills along with the technical skills leads to optimal results that are sustainable year over year and become a part of the culture of the business.

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