



Quality Conversation

With Mikel Harry

The foremost expert on Six Sigma talks about its past, present and future.

by Dirk Dusharme

Quality Digest recently had the opportunity to spend a few hours with Mikel Harry, who's widely considered the foremost expert—if not inventor—of Six Sigma as we know it today, at his Phoenix ranch. Always outspoken, Harry had much to say about the third generation of Six Sigma, the current state of Six Sigma consulting, the American Society for Quality and more. But more than anything, he was excited about the methodology's future—particularly his partnership with Arizona State University to bring low-cost, comprehensive Six Sigma training to a global market.

QD: I've heard you speak about Six Sigma Generation III. What do you mean by this? And how does it tie into another of your concepts: IRCA—Innovate, Configure, Realize, Attenuate?

Harry: It's how we apply Six Sigma in our own line of sight as individuals. The first generation of Six Sigma was focused on defect reduction: That was at Motorola. The second was when I refocused it—at ADD and then at AlliedSignal and GE—on economics and cost reduction. The third generation is about value creation. How do I grow the company, my shareholder value, my stakeholder value? That's my big metric now.

Six Sigma Generation III is about power thinking, not tool application. We're not giving up tool applications; we don't give up generations.

In ICRA, "innovate" means to introduce something new. When you do that, you need to config-

ure at the next level down. When you bring in an idea, you've got to configure the details of it. Once you've put the details through configuration, you now have to *realize* those details. Once you've done that, you have to *attenuate*, or lessen, risk.

First, you take big ideas and integrate them through the lens of innovation. Then take the same big ideas and look at the idea of configuration. Then look at the idea of realization through the lens of risk and do that with attenuation. You'll start to have very deep and rich insight into the problem you're working out.

QD: What else is new in Six Sigma Generation III?

Harry: The introduction of White Belts. Arm a White Belt with the right ideas and simplistic tools applied in a line-of-sight way on a much smaller project. What if half of GE's employees were White Belts? That would mean 250,000 people returning \$20,000 a year. They could make Black Belts look like nothing.

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QD: Quality Digest's surveys seem to indicate that Six Sigma may be losing momentum. Has Six Sigma run its course?

Harry: I talk to executives in a wide array of industries, and I see that Six Sigma in manufacturing is saturated. I'll give you an example of why this might be. At Motorola we had a big push for design of experiments in the early '80s. We pushed and pushed at getting it implemented. Then we saw enrollment start to drop off. So we pushed more, but