

A Belt's 3 Most-Powerful Tools

My journey as a Belt began about 13 years ago, and my role as a quality leader has been a large part of my life.

Serving in Marine aviation for most of my 24 years of military service, nearly every breath I took was about quality and doing things the right way. Airplanes falling out of the sky was deeply frowned upon, and every person—no matter what their role—was responsible to see that it never happened.

When I first considered a

career in lean Six Sigma (LSS), the statistical aspects of the job turned my stomach in knots.

Ever since elementary school, math had haunted me. Memories of long evenings struggling through memorizing multiplication tables, and the next day watching friends at recess while I was forced to stay inside and stare at a paper of numbers that made no sense came back as if it was yesterday.

Even so, after encouragement from peers who saw I had an analytic mind and worked well with teams, I faced my fears and began my LSS journey.

While I'd love to write that I'm now an accomplished statistician, it wouldn't be the truth.

Don't get me wrong, I can hang in there with the best of them in analyzing data, and I believe that without data you don't have a project. But I would still rather let those who find statistics more exciting than a class-five whitewater rafting trip have at it.

The allure of LSS

When I first became interested in performance improvement, one of the main drivers that lured me into the LSS world was being able to influence change.

My military career path wasn't the typical journey that most people experience. When people ask what I did in the Marines, I smirk because my answer needs great explanation.

Basically, I did a lot of things throughout the years, but one common thread that runs

throughout an incredible career was that I went into units and departments and turned less-than-desirable results into high-performing outcomes.

I got a thrill when I was told I was going into a culture that was broken, and my job was to fix it.

As a civilian when I discovered I could do the same thing using LSS methods, it excited me.

But it wasn't until I worked for Bell Helicopter Textron that I heard the one word that sent chills of excitement down my back: "leadership."

I had attended a company town hall meeting, and a Bell executive vice president presented on the company's Black Belt (BB) program. He stood in front of the room and talked about metrics, data and improvements.

Much like when I was a child, my mind drifted off to more exciting things like taking an afternoon ride on my Harley-Davidson.

Somewhere in the sounds of Charlie Brown's teacher, I heard a word that was music to my ears. He said something that echoes even to this day, "Being a BB is more about being a leader than it is a statistician." He now had my undivided attention.

After 24 years of being a leader, I knew that was one thing I could do well. Even more so than knowing I was good at leadership, it was the one thing I missed most after my retirement from the Marines.

After retirement, I had become one of thousands of other people sitting in a sea of cubicles—where



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few even knew who I was. No longer did people come to ask my opinion, seek advice or even care whether I had thoughts of my own.

I missed not being respected for my years of experience and not being able to invest in people.

What I missed most was observing the absence of good leadership in the civilian community. So when I heard there was a program where I could once again make a difference, I was all over it.

Three essential tools

My soapbox, wherever I go now, is that there are three tools every Green Belt, BB and MBB must have before he or she is weighed on his or her ability to analyze or problem solve.

They are more imperative than being able to complete a reverse regression analysis or build a house of quality. Passing a BB test is noble, but these tools won't be on any test to become a Belt, yet they are vital for success:

1. Leadership.
2. Communication.
3. Facilitation.

Leadership is at the core of what we do as Belts. Without the ability to lead, our technical ability is useless.

Throughout the years, I have seen individuals promoted and hired into positions of authority because they were great techni-

cally; however, because no one assessed the person's experience in leading, the result was that his or her teams failed.

In our world, if people can't lead, they generally end up taking control of projects because they're unable to delegate and become overburdened instead of giving ownership away.

As project leads, we are to build a team, extract ideas from its knowledge and experience, and help walk it through the journey of seeing new ways of doing its work.

Recently, I heard a TED Talk that covered this subject. The takeaway was that leadership training in today's business world is broken.

There are consultants and HR experts on the payroll giving classes and lectures, but few are truly learning how to lead. Questions that must be asked include, "How are you mentoring, and who is mentoring you?"

There are a lot of smart people in today's society. Yet while one's ability to learn knowledge might can be graded on a test, a person's ability to lead cannot.

The test is when the responsibility to lead had been demonstrated and proven. Just because one has a title doesn't make them a leader. I am reminded of the Chinese proverb that says, "He who sayeth he's leading, yet hath no one behind him is only taking a walk."

Communication goes hand in

hand with leadership. Great leaders are also great communicators. Most of us fall somewhere in the middle of the business food chain in our work environment.

Even if you are a director, you're still shaping the message coming from the top because it flows down to those who do the work, and vice versa. Being able to communicate those messages are imperative to run a successful project and, more importantly, to implement change.

The ability to communicate applies to the spoken and written word. Sending out team updates in all caps or red letters to ensure everyone understands the urgency of a deadline will instantly backfire on a project lead.

I have had more conversations with project leads about their ability to communicate (or better said, their inability to communicate) in emails than I care to think about.

There must be a careful balance between creating an urgency and being considerate of the intense workload most team members are under when trying to move a project forward. They give us those change management tools for a reason. They are communication tools that shouldn't be forgotten.

At one organization, I had just started as the MBB and was told about a team member who had been challenged with proper communication within his project team.

I decided to attend one of his team meetings and slid quietly in the back of the room. As I sat there, I immediately realized the problem: No one was in charge.

The project lead—fiddling with a dry erase marker—was sitting at a table amongst the other team members.

There were multiple dominate personalities in the room, everyone had an opinion and no one was agreeing to anything. It was nothing less than chaos.

As leaders, we have to know how to communicate, but also be willing to assert our position even during difficult situations. We can't take a backseat. Our role as leaders is to communicate throughout the change process and communicate well.

“Facilitation” is a word I struggled with using because there is so much more involved in the context of being a facilitator, and I didn't want to be lost.

Being a facilitator certainly includes the previously mentioned leadership and communication skill sets, but there is another element tucked quietly within: Playing the role of coach.

It helps if you look at facilitation as “coaching.” Coaching is asking the right questions to

help others discover their own answers.

Instead of “telling” people what to do, helping them in the discovery process is crucial to sustainment.

Coaching is a big market today; however, few really understand it. Well-known leadership gurus and motivational speakers are making big bucks offering coaching DVDs, seminars and social media newsfeeds, yet few of them are actually coaching.

What they are really giving their customers are just seminar talks and teaching with the buzz word of “coaching” to pull them in.

In its purest form, coaching is interactive and personal. It's a one-on-one approach in which two individuals or an individual and a group converse back and forth to help people find a way forward.

A trained professional coach is taught that he or she doesn't tell people what they must do, but rather guides them in a journey of discovery through deliberate questions that help people navigate to where they want to be.

Coaching looks through the individual's map of the world. When a person has that light bulb moment because he or she made


a discovery, the plan forward is more likely to be successful.

The voice for others

I see myself as a voice for the unheard employee who has known for years what the problems are and has been telling supervisor after supervisor how to implement the improvement—but no one has ever listened.

My role is to do the *gemba*, not so I can go see what is being done incorrectly, but to listen to what people are saying.

When I stand in front of a room full of people and present a problem statement, my No. 1 responsibility is to lead in a way that captures every idea that's swirling around in the minds within the room.

I am a leader, communicator and facilitator of change for those who do the work, because those are the three most powerful tools of a BB. 

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