

## What Is Six Sigma?

**Six Sigma is not about making better products or providing better services as much as it is about improving the business processes behind those products and services. The quality control discipline rests on the principle that if you can measure it, you can control it. By measuring a process each step of the way, you can measure the performance and take corrective action (see chart “How Does Six Sigma Work?” page 9).**

Six Sigma was introduced in the mid-1980s by Motorola Inc. to set new quality control standards and to reduce defects in the manufacturing processes. After being adopted by General Electric Co., Six Sigma gained wider attention and broader applications. Today, it involves a five-step process:

1. Define the goals for improvement based on the organization’s strategic plans.
2. Measure process performance and collect data.

3. Analyze statistics and other data to isolate aspects of the process that are causing defects.
4. Find creative ways to improve the process or gain efficiencies. Then test and validate the potential improvements. Next, implement those changes that have proven to be effective.
5. Change the management systems to ensure the improvements remain in place.

Organizations implementing Six Sigma typically have three types of experts involved: Greenbelts, Blackbelts and Master Blackbelts. Greenbelts attend several days of training and study under experts. They are typically managers who have an understanding of the operation being studied. Blackbelts undergo a month or more of training and typically are dedicated full time to Six Sigma projects. Master Blackbelts are highly trained, full-time quality experts who train and mentor Greenbelts and Blackbelts. | LAURI GIESEN