Top Ten Six Sigma Black Belt Candidate Qualities

By Charles Waxer

Whether you are a process owner, Master Black Belt, or Champion, you will at some point need to interview candidates for an open Black Belt position. Or, you may be a Green Belt or Quality Engineer with aspirations of someday working full-time as a Six Sigma Black Belt. What should you look for in a Black Belt candidate or how should you develop yourself for a Black Belt position? This article will address these questions.

The Role Of The Six Sigma Black Belt
Six Sigma Black Belts are most often referred to as Change Agents, and there is no doubt that the Black Belt role is a leadership position within an organization (please note that I intentionally did not say "within the quality department or Six Sigma organization"). Black Belts are full-time Six Sigma project team leaders responsible for implementing process improvement projects (DMAIC or DFSS) within the business. Black Belts are knowledgeable and highly skilled in the use of the Six Sigma methodologies and tools, as well as facilitation and change management, and lead subject matter experts to increase customer satisfaction levels and business productivity.

Six Sigma Black Belt Qualities
So, what should you look for in your next Black Belt? Here is my personal top ten list. You'll notice that I bulletized the list instead of numbering it. This was done on purpose, as a numbered list usually indicates that one point might be more valuable than another. In this case, all ten qualities are considered essential and should have equal weighting.

- **Customer Advocacy.** Black Belts should readily communicate the understanding that customers are always the recipients of processes, and that customers (both internal or external) are always the final judge of product or service quality. Understanding customer needs ("CTQs," although they may not know the Six Sigma language yet) is the key to process improvement. Hence, a Black Belt candidate should speak clearly about how eliminating process variation is a key to business improvement.

- **Passion.** No cold fish are welcomed in Six Sigma. Black Belts must be self-motivated, have initiative, and have a positive personality. At times they are expected to be a cheerleader, to pick up the team and help them move forward productively. Passion also gives them fortitude to persevere, even when the going may get tough on a project.

- **Change Leadership.** Black Belts have demonstrated performance as a change agent in the past, regardless of their job duties. During the interview, ask them how they challenged the status quo in their last role. They didn’t?...well, they may not be the right person for your Black Belt position. Changing the organization and how business is accomplished may upset employees; change agents and change leaders have a way of accomplishing positive change while engendering support for the change.

- **Communication.** Black Belts are effective communicators, which is essential for the many roles they serve: trainers, coaches, and mentors. Black Belts should be able understandably speak to all audiences (from shop floor employees to executive management). Understanding the various needs of audience members and tailoring the message to address their concerns is the mark of an effective communicator. Once a Black Belt has these qualities, creating Power Point...
presentation slides (a requirement in corporate America, right?) is a snap.

- **Business Acumen.** Black Belts are business leaders, not the quality managers of the past. As such, they should have business knowledge and the ability to display the linkage between projects and desired business results. How is a project making the company stronger competitively and financially? You can ask questions during the interview to determine if the Black Belt candidates have made this connection in their prior roles.

- **Project Management.** Six Sigma is accomplished one project at a time. We should not lose sight of the fact that the Black Belt must manage projects from scope, requirements, resources, timeline, and variance perspectives. Knowledge of project management fundamentals and experience managing projects are essential.

- **Technical Aptitude.** The Black Belt candidate need not be an engineering or statistical graduate, but in some cases this is beneficial – provided the other top ten qualities listed are also present. In all cases, a Black Belt is required to collect and analyze data for determining an improvement strategy. Without some technical aptitude (computer/software literacy and analytical skills) the Black Belt will be frustrated in this role.

- **Team Player and Leader.** Black Belts must possess the ability to lead, work with teams, be part of a team, and understand team dynamics (forming, storming, norming, performing). In order to effectively lead a team, a Black Belt must be likeable, get along with people, have good influencing skills, and motivate others.

- **Result Oriented.** Black Belts are expected to perform and produce tangible financial results for the business. They must be hard working and quick to demonstrate success.

- **Fun.** Black Belts should enjoy their jobs if they are passionate about them. By having fun, you encourage others to do the same.

**Qualities that Didn’t Make The Top Ten (But Are Important)**

- **Trust And Integrity.** It almost goes without saying, but if I didn’t list these two qualities someone would have emailed me. These are requirements and are non-negotiable.

- **Deep Process Knowledge.** Six Sigma involves having a team of subject matter experts working to eliminate defects and improve a process. Obviously, someone on the team must have a deep knowledge of the process being investigated. This does not have to be the Black Belt, but it can be.

- **Been There, Done That.** Sometimes a team gives credibility to a Black Belt that has "been through it." When the team is forming, this can help accelerate the acceptance of the Black Belt, but it's not a requirement.

- **Knows Six Sigma, ISO, TQM, Etc.** Remember, you are building your business leadership pipeline one Black Belt at a time. Having a specific and detailed knowledge of Six Sigma is not a prerequisite -- they will go through training; having the top ten list of qualities for a Black Belt (listed above) is.

- **Diverse Work Experience.** This will enable the Black Belt to appreciate more than just one aspect of a process improvement project. For example, if a Black Belt is fresh out of a statistics college program, s/he is likely to predominantly utilize newly acquired skills and tools. Black Belts with a diverse background can appreciate projects and issues more holistically.

- **A Degree.** While having a degree supports the idea that a person has developed independent thinking skills, not having a degree does not imply that the Black Belt candidate does not have independent thinking skills. This quality is very debatable as I have seen excellent Black Belts with and without degrees.

**Direct From The Mind Of Billybob**

Those of you who frequent the iSixSigma discussion forum have probably run across a post or two from a colorful Green Belt named Billybob. His anecdotes about possums and Six Sigma are found to be entertaining, at least by some of the other readers :). Below are Billybob’s (slightly modified)

thoughts on the top ten qualities of a successful Black Belt, which are based on his personal experiences with his own Black Belt.

1. Always tell the plant manager you support the Green Belts with the time they need even when you don't.

2. Always play golf with the plant manager.

3. Never have a Black Belt project of your own.

4. Complete your certification project, but don't worry about the benefits being sustained.

5. Be overheard over cubical walls or on phone conversations bad mouthing Green Belts for being the same type of poor project managers as you are.

6. "You know all the tools...so go use them."

7. You haven't a clue as to what good project selection is for the Green Belts.

8. [Forget about the 1.5 shift...] You know well what an 8 to 5 shift means.

9. You have never been wrong, no matter how long it takes for you to be right.

10. You'll read this list and say, "I'm glad I'm a better Black Belt than that!"

References