



OFFICE HANDBOOK

CHAPTER 9: Workplace Safety

To relieve the company of any undue “liability burdens,” the legal department has determined that employees should at least be made aware of the following building safety policies:

FIRE ALARMS AND DRILLS: The Company will periodically set off loud sirens, accompanied by flashing strobes, during the middle of the workday for no apparent reason. Every effort will be made to schedule these during major deadlines. In certain cases, managers (as well as their children) may use the fire alarm and/or sprinkler system as a means of road-blocking productive employees.

EMERGENCY STAIRWAYS: In the event of a building emergency, employees must exit through a designated stairway. These are not exits per se, but should, under the right circumstances, lead to one. **DO NOT USE THE ELEVATORS.** They have been outfitted as luxury survival pods to ensure that the executive team can continue with “business as usual.” Please note that newly implanted employee-tracking chips are equipped to prevent unauthorized pod access.

FIRE WARDENS: Each floor must appoint two fire wardens. In exchange for the position’s inherent unpopularity, fire wardens receive a red plastic fireman’s hat, a “Lil’ Lifesavers” badge, and the right to rummage through coworkers’ abandoned desks once they reach the nearest exit. Dummy ham radio enthusiasts preferred.

WORKER WHISTLES: To ensure workers’ complete personal safety, the company will be distributing the Worker Whistle® to every employee. The whistle is to be blown only in the event of emergencies and must be visibly worn at all times while on the premises. Inappropriate whistle usage and/or unsatisfactory display of the whistle will result in harsh disciplinary action.

—Ryan Underwood



Consultant Debunking Unit

Six Sigma Stigma? *By Martin Kihn*

NOT LONG AGO, in its global pursuit of the Truth, the Consultant Debunking Unit (CDU) journeyed to Japan for a tour of the car-making facility in Toyota City. Guided by engineers, we heard a lot about the legendary quality of Toyota’s vehicles. Eager to show we knew a thing or two about quality ourselves, we softball-ed our hosts with the obvious question: “When did Toyota start using Six Sigma, anyway?”

Long silence. After some awkward consultation in Japanese, the engineers turned back to us and asked, “What is Six Sigma?”

Good question. The name derives from Sigma being the Greek symbol used to denote deviations from the mean. And so Six Sigma is essentially a set of procedures and tools designed to measure and analyze “defects” in a process and help determine what’s causing them. The goal—the “six sigma” part—is 3.4 defects per million, or 99.997% perfection.

As with many management trends of recent vintage, blame Jack Welch for this one. The former General Electric CEO devoted a chapter to it in *Winning* (HarperBusiness, 2005), writing, “You can’t afford not to understand it.”

Now, like a virtually flawless brush-fire, it’s spread well beyond its 1980s roots as a statistical tool for reducing manufacturing defects. Thousands of companies, from Sony to DuPont to Merrill Lynch, have flown in experts from the Six Sigma Institute and other

consultancies to train cadres of so-called black- and green-belts in the ways of process control and deviation.

No one disputes the worthiness of Six Sigma’s intentions, much less the statistics. But a quick survey of a handful of industries, using product-quality ratings from J.D. Power and Associates, led CDU to believe that while Welch may be right that you can’t afford not to understand Six Sigma, you can’t necessarily afford to use it, either.

In copiers, Xerox ranks lower in quality than competitors Canon, Toshiba, and Hewlett-Packard, yet it proudly trumpets its Six Sigma legacy back to the 1980s. In wireless phones, quality varies by region, but Sprint PCS ranked highest only in the West; it tied in the Northeast with Verizon, which had “fewer problems experienced with static/interference.” Nonetheless, quality consultancy Six Sigma Systems cites Sprint as a major client.

In boats (!), Larson Boats ranks last in a field of 11 companies that make express cruisers. It has two Six Sigma black belts on staff and boasts, “Quality isn’t something we add at the end of the line!” And in cars, Ford stayed below average in the recent Initial Quality Study, despite their company-wide policy in 1999 to adopt . . . well, you-know-what. Once again, the highest quality ranking went to Toyota . . . a company that had to learn about Six Sigma from the CDU.

Martin Kihn is author of House of Lies: How Management Consultants Steal Your Watch and Then Tell You the Time (Warner Business Books, 2005).

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Truth room session (*n.*) meeting where a consultant tells a client something that’s probably true, but not flattering