



The Role of Listening in Six Sigma Quality Management Systems

Six Sigma and Customer Listening. One of the more recent approaches to quality control, and perhaps the most powerful yet, is the process called "Six Sigma" which begins with listening to customers to determine the biggest quality issues that can be remedied to reduce costs and improve profits.

Written at approximately a high school reading level (for which this time-pressured reviewer was most grateful), Subir Chowdhury's *The Power of Six Sigma* takes a complex subject and renders it simple, in a mere 124 and a half pages. It consists of a fictional dialog between two friends, one a laid-off manager at the mythical "American Burger Co." and the other a rising star at its Six-Sigma-using sister-company, "American Pizza". During the course of this "conversation" the successful manager tells his laid-off friend how Six Sigma brought him both recognition as a "Six Sigma black belt" and led to profitability and fanatical customer loyalty for his pizza company while the clueless burger company spiraled down and out.

Benefitting from the Experience of Customers and Employees. As Chowdhury tells us, a company that implements Six Sigma creates special action teams of key employees selected from a cross-section of the company. These teams identify problems by talking to customers and employees, then quantify the cost of these problems, identify ways to eradicate the problems at their source, and implement improvements. Incremental implementation of improvements (a.k.a. a prototyping process) is coupled with careful measurement of how much progress, if any, is made towards eradicating the problem.

To illustrate the process, the book's characters discuss the imaginary problem of burned pizza crust at American Pizza. The Six Sigma team made this particular problem their target because careful listening to customers and employees revealed that burned crust was both the biggest source of complaints from customers and the biggest source of inefficiency for employees. Once identified, this problem was attacked with a series of carefully measured prototyping steps in which new procedures and equipment were put in place and evaluated for costs and benefits. Ultimately the problem was eliminated altogether by developing pizza ovens with internal conveyor belts that guaranteed standardized cook times.