

Commitment is magic in magic-bullet management schemes

By **DAVE MURPHY**

The next time your company brings in a consultant to teach you anything, think about Dorothy from "The Wizard of Oz." When she wanted to fulfill her dream of getting back home, all she had to do was click her heels together and say, "There's no place like home." Right?

That's what companies like to believe when they bring in consultants. A little magic, a little mantra and -- voila! -- the world is a better place.

But Dorothy wouldn't have learned much if things were really that simple. For the lesson to mean anything, she had to enlist three friends, take a long journey and overcome her demons: the Wicked Witch and her cohorts

And she had to believe, deep down, that clicking her heels together would actually do some good. Then, finally, she was ready to wake up.

A good book called "The Power of Six Sigma" made me think of Dorothy's adventures.

Author **Subir Chowdhury** uses a fable to explain how the management strategy called Six Sigma works. His two main characters frequently talk about their cynicism toward all the other management initiatives they have seen -- programs that provided hot air and not-so-hot results.

In his preface, **Chowdhury** explains how many Fortune 500 companies signed up for Six Sigma once General Electric's acclaimed leader, Jack Welch, strongly praised the program. But a lot of those companies haven't gotten the same sorts of results that GE did.

"The program is supposed to drive out fear," **Chowdhury** writes, "but I saw fear alive and well and in everyone's blood."

He wrote the book to help people understand Six Sigma, and he does a good job of that.

But the cynic in me keeps going back to this: For Six Sigma or any other fresh management strategy to work, your company's managers have to have at least as much insight as a prepubescent girl from Kansas.

How many companies can say that?

Because of her journey, Dorothy sincerely believed that clicking her heels together would work. But too many top managers bring in consultants and programs because their boards of directors recommend them or Welch swears by them or they promise great results, not because the managers sincerely believe the programs will do any good. Often they don't understand the programs well enough to know whether they will help.

When things get tough, human nature steers people away from change. If a new program runs into difficulty and the top people don't sincerely believe in it, they'll run back to the safety of the status quo. The latest management fad will die faster than you can say XFL.

As **Chowdhury** explains it, Six Sigma's main goal is to reduce errors and waste in systematic ways that will lead to greater customer satisfaction and higher profits. Among the main steps in the process are:

- Assign a middle manager to be in charge and work full time on the project. The manager, referred to as a Black Belt, would be supervised by an executive responsible for overseeing, funding and supporting the projects, but it would be up to the Black Belt to identify which problems are the most significant and how they can best be solved.
- Give all Black Belts four weeks of training, but in one-week increments, so they have a chance to go back to work and apply what they've learned.
- Make the Black Belts and their teams responsible for defining where the underlying problems are and eliminating them.

They need to measure the company's current status and where they want to be -- using numerical goals, not subjective measures -- then analyze the data, decide how to improve the situation and put in a control system to make sure that the improvements stick

- Give specific duties and financial rewards to the Black Belts and their teams, assuming they accomplish their goals and save the company money.

Obviously, this is tremendously simplified, but Six Sigma has some strong benefits. Having talented middle managers in charge is smart for several reasons: They have enough technical expertise to brainstorm with the rank-and-filers on their team; they can be reassigned to the project full time in ways that top managers probably could not be, and it gives companies a chance to challenge and reward their best middle managers.

Having the training in increments also makes sense. As **Chowdhury** points out,

too many consultants engage in "data dumps," simply pouring a bunch of ideas into your head without ever spending the time to determine how much of it has sunk in -- and without the company ever applying it to your day-to-day job.

Again, though, it all eventually comes down to the company's top management.

At GE, Welch said people who wanted to be promoted had better become Black Belts. He made it very clear that management supported the program and that doing a Six Sigma assignment wasn't an exercise in futility.

Whether it's Six Sigma or any other management strategy, top managers need to follow a simple rule: If you don't honestly believe in the strategy, don't waste everyone's time by trying to adopt it.

You need a brain, a heart and courage to get you to Oz. Otherwise, you're not clicking your heels -- you're just dragging your feet.