

What Are They Teaching Those Kids?

Do MBA degrees fall short?

By *Ryan E. Day - assistant editor at Quality Digest, USA*

For those of us frustrated by the prevalence of mediocrity and apathy in the management theater, there may yet be hope. The **Avery Point Group's annual employment study found a sharp increase in demand for lean and Six Sigma skills this year.** That would seem to indicate companies and businesses around the world are definitely coming to realize that root cause analysis, total quality management (TQM), and Six Sigma are valuable principles that, if embraced and implemented at the core level, can translate to real-world success.

Having worked for some 20-odd different employers (not sure if that's good or bad), I've had the opportunity to observe a wide variety of management "styles." Although these ranged from autocratic, management by walking around (MBWA), Type-1, micro-managing, hands-off, and democratic to every combination possible, **most managers had two things in common: They had no concept of root cause analysis or Six Sigma principles.** The phrases "step over a dollar to save a dime" and "we *don't* have time to fix it right once, but we *do* have time to quick-fix it three times" come to mind.

A few of those managers had the benefit of a college education and earned an MBA, but they seemed no closer to being effective managers than those who came up through the blue-collar ranks. I haven't been through business schooling myself, so I have to ask, "If they don't teach them root cause analysis, TQM, Six Sigma, and lean principles, what *are* they teaching them?"

It seems that the verbiage itself—"master of business administration"—would imply that effective managing should be the main thrust of the entire program, but I'm just a grease monkey, **so I enlisted some bright minds and accomplished leaders to help me understand.**

Doris Marin parlayed her MBA from Western New Mexico University (WNMU) into a quality assurance career in the mining industry. When the company she worked for created a quality assurance department, she was informed that a Green Belt certification in Six Sigma would be required in addition to her degree. To her credit, Marin not only got the Green Belt on the company's dime, but also went the extra mile and earned a Black Belt on her own. **"My education at WNMU was very valuable, but I think they could have included comprehensive Six Sigma principles in the curriculum without jeopardizing anything else,"** says Marin.

Judging by the WNMU website description of its MBA program, I would have to agree. It appears that only two out of 11 required courses deal with quality processes.

Yale's School of Management and Harvard Business School don't seem to do much better. Yale's program has only four out of 15 required courses dealing with quality processes, and Harvard only one out of 10. **No doubt these schools teach some important elements of business management, but we live in a time when the need for a dramatic shift in focus is readily apparent.**

Fortunately, not all schools are created equally.

Nelson M. Fraiman, **professor of professional practice and head of the Decision, Risk, and Operations division at Columbia Business School, clued me in to a few things.** Although terminology may vary, the principles of quality remain the same.

“Many of the MBA courses taught [here] contain the same elements as Six Sigma,” says Fraiman, who is also the director of The W. Edwards Deming Center for Quality, Productivity, and Competitiveness at Columbia Business School. “Further training in those particular aspects would be more appropriate for fields such as engineering. The principles taught by Deming are woven throughout the curriculum at Columbia. **We stress to our students that when they leave academics and enter the business world, they will be responsible for helping to create that climate for quality.**”

It seems that some business schools are beginning to get it.

[Eastern Michigan University](#); [California State University, East Bay](#); and [North Carolina State](#) all offer lean and Six Sigma training programs. **Although not an official component of their MBA curricula, they have obviously taken note of industry’s demand for further quality management training.**

With a continued push from industry leaders toward this type of quality training, we can reasonably hope that the overall emphasis in MBA programs will begin to reflect that demand. Then, God willing the core concept of a “culture of quality” can take root and emerge as a prominent theme in education and business.