

# Lean Six Sigma in Asia

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Previously published in iSixSigma Magazine, this feature explores one consultant's experiences implementing Lean Six Sigma in Asian countries.

By Randy Woods

The methodology of Lean Six Sigma is flexible enough to be applied globally to virtually any type of industry. But that doesn't mean every deployment is the same, especially when comparing deployments from country to country and across culturally diverse regions.

Uwe H. Kaufmann, managing director for the Centre for Organisational Effectiveness (COE), a process improvement consulting group based in Singapore, has more than two decades of experience in the quality industry, working for companies in Europe, North America and Asia. During that time, working for TUV Rhineland Group, GE Capital and Rath & Strong/Aon Management Consulting, Kaufmann has picked up on some notable differences in the ways that Lean Six Sigma is viewed, applied and studied in various regions of the world.

“You cannot offer the same product everywhere without

customization,” Kaufmann said. “The same is true for Six Sigma.”

Kaufmann’s work with COE and Aon over the last 10 years has brought him into contact with businesses such as Siemens, Bosch, JP Morgan and Johnson & Johnson, as they have deployed process improvement programs across Asia, in countries including China, Malaysia, Korea, Japan, Indonesia and Vietnam. “There is no one ‘Asian culture,’ of course,” he said.

“But I’ve been here long enough to recognize some differences and get some understanding of the other nearby cultures.”

**Objectives** – “When you apply Six Sigma in the U.S. and Europe, the objective is to increase productivity and to save money,” Kaufmann said. “If you go to companies here in Singapore, or in other places, like China, they will say ‘We’re different.’ In China, the main objective is people development.”

**Belt status** – “If you’re applying Six Sigma at a European company like Siemens [based in Berlin, Germany], they don’t care as much whether you’re a Green Belt or a Black Belt as long as you get the job done,” Kaufmann said. “In Singapore, certification is very, very highly regarded. Many people will pursue certification even if the company doesn’t want it.”

**Education** – “In China, people are so keen to learn, it’s a joy to teach them,” he said. “[Chinese students] work hard in Green Belt and Black Belt courses. They come really prepared and ask a lot of very detailed and specific questions. They say ‘Please send me training materials’ before the classes even begin. No one wanted that at Siemens.”

**Hierarchy** – “If you look at a typical meeting in the U.S., you can’t always figure out who’s the boss,” Kaufmann says. “It’s a very open

environment and encourages a free flow of ideas. In traditional Chinese companies there is a much stronger division, and the boss is The Boss.”

Instead of joining in on meetings and engaging with the team members to encourage buy-in, the leadership at many Chinese firms tends to delegate that responsibility to others. “The term ‘buy-in’ is not really in their vocabulary,” Kaufmann said. “They just say ‘this is our policy’ and expect people to follow it.”

**Government** – In Singapore, the environment for Six Sigma deployment, on the surface, looks similar to that of many “homogenized” Western cultures, such as Europe and the United States, said Kaufmann, who is originally from Germany. However, one crucial difference between Singapore and the West is the role of government. “In Singapore, the best ‘company’ to work with is probably the government,” Kaufmann said. “We do a lot of work with them.”

Singapore, which is a parliamentary republic, has a well-earned reputation over the last 40 years for hyper-efficiency and control through a strict legal code, yet the government is considered one of the world’s most tolerant of open, free-market capitalism – a perfect breeding ground for Six Sigma.

Recently, Kaufmann said, a former prime minister of Singapore returned from a trip to Europe, extolling the virtues of the increased productivity he had seen through Six Sigma programs. The minister’s comments quickly went out through the newspapers, prompting other government ministers to propose their own Six Sigma initiatives.

“We expect to hear much more out of the government in the next couple of months about Six Sigma because of this,” Kaufmann said.

“Many companies in Singapore are likely to follow because usually these initiatives come with funding. That’s very different than in places like Germany, where government is seen as a dusty old organization that tends to follow whatever private industry does.”

In countries such as China or Vietnam, the atmosphere is very different, with governments that have remained largely impenetrable to Six Sigma, Kaufmann said. “In China, there’s Shanghai, which is very open to Western companies, and then there’s the middle of the country – two very different things,” he said. “But China is, of course, getting more approachable. They will suck everything in that looks new and promising.”

**Personal relationships** – In China, one of the most important concepts to understand in business is guanxi, which translates to “relationships.” Before any deals can be made, there must be a series of face-to-face meetings to establish a personal rapport that tends to go deeper than what is found in the West. The same is true in Singapore and in many other Asian cultures, Kaufmann said.

“If you sell Lean Six Sigma to Siemens [in Germany], you can do it all on the phone,” Kaufmann said. “Here, deployment by phone doesn’t work. You need to meet up with people so they can get comfortable with you. To deploy Lean Six Sigma in this part of the world, Black Belts, and especially Master Black Belts, must be excellent in their people skills or they’ll never get anywhere.”

**Randy Woods** is an associate editor for iSixSigma Magazine.

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