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## MID-IOWA BUSINESS

# Can Lean and Six Sigma rescue the federal government?

**I**t's been a tough summer. My Chicago Cubs have one of the worst records in Major League Baseball, despite having the sixth-largest payroll. Their expense per victory is a testament to the organization's ineptitude.

Then Congress held the country hostage for the better part of a month "negotiating" resolution to the debt limit crisis. While a default was narrowly avoided, I've yet to read a single positive assessment of the agreement from either side of the political spectrum.

I'm not sure who to be more embarrassed with ... the Cubs or Congress.

One might expect me to be a bit more optimistic for the latter. At last count, six presidential candidates have signed the "Strong America Now" pledge to adopt Lean and Six Sigma techniques in an effort to eliminate the national debt by 2017. As someone who makes a living helping businesses and local government organizations apply Lean and Six Sigma tools to improve operating results and customer service, I should be licking my chops. Instead, I'm rolling my eyes.

Let's quickly review both tools. Lean focuses worker's energies on identifying and eliminating the waste in the jobs they perform: those activities that take time, effort and consume resources but don't



**Rick Brimeyer**

add perceived value to the customer. Six Sigma is a high-powered, statistically based problem-solving tool used to reduce the variation in processes so they are highly predictable and repetitive.

Both tools have been successfully deployed within businesses and lower level (e.g., municipal) government organizations. The federal government is the ultimate "target-rich environment" when it comes to opportunities for eliminating waste. But the challenges facing Lean and Six Sigma at the federal, and even state, levels of government are immense.

First and foremost, governments are political organizations and their political nature increases at least tenfold from municipal to state, from state to federal. As such, "leaders" are retained based on their ability to appease an increasingly entitlement-minded, short-sighted constituency.

There is little tolerance for tough, but desperately needed solutions. Those courageous enough to do the right thing will likely find themselves out of job following the next election.

Businesses (especially those privately held that don't have to march to the next quarterly earnings report) and municipalities with a city manager type of government at least offer a framework of continuity for the leader willing to do the right thing.

The influence of special interest groups increases dramatically with each level of government. While a city council member may have to deal with an especially squeaky citizen, a state senator is dealing with deep-pocketed lobbyists. By definition, special interest groups don't give a rip about data or care about what's best for the general population; they are only interested in themselves.

Success in both Lean and Six Sigma requires a cultural change throughout the organization. They become as much of a philosophy, influencing how leaders and employees think about their work, as a tool used in improving their work. Cultural change takes longer than an election cycle. Change starts with leadership, especially aligned leadership.

Here again, a monumental difference exists between industry and high-level governments. Businesses which have successfully utilized Lean or Six Sigma have all of their leaders aligned on not only their goals, but on how they will be

attained. I don't need the power of my Six Sigma background to calculate that there is less than a 0.0001 percent chance of that occurring within our ideologically polarized federal government.

The skill both parties demonstrate for taking the same dataset and twisting it to meet their needs leaves me cynical that Six Sigma will provide them with the religion to begin evaluating situations objectively.

On a positive note, the Cubs have played better in recent weeks. It's too late to do any good this year, but it does offer a glimmer of hope for next season if they address some problems during the off-season.

Likewise, Lean and Six Sigma can work for the federal government, but not without first resolving several severe dysfunctions. Without that, Lean and Six Sigma are merely more gimmicks.

Despite the past 103 years of futility, I like the Cubs' chances better.

**Rick Brimeyer** is the president of Brimeyer LLC, an independent management consulting firm located in Ames that guides organizations to higher performance by focusing on process improvement and leadership development.

Further information is available at [www.brimeyerllc.com](http://www.brimeyerllc.com) or by calling (515) 450-8855.