

# YMCA Upgrades Day Camps Using Six Sigma

by Janet Jacobsen



## At a Glance . . .

- When a senior leader at the YMCA of the USA introduced Six Sigma to the youth development department, a new method for managing and tracking projects was ushered into the organization.
- Upon completing a Green Belt-level training course, a YMCA project team used Six Sigma tools to improve the culture of the organization's summer day camp.
- As staff became more comfortable using Six Sigma, project work became more organized and data-driven, and the project team exceeded its first-year goals.

When Jorge Perez was earning his master's degree in business administration while working as a branch executive director for the YMCA of Metropolitan Dallas, Texas, he signed up for a quality improvement course focused on Six Sigma. As Perez learned more about the process improvement methodology, he started using Six Sigma principles to manage his own work projects. Becoming more comfortable, he started investigating how those same methods could be modified for others who worked in nonprofit organizations like the YMCA (Y).

During his career with the Y, Perez noticed project management efforts were often haphazard and unfocused. While he tried preaching the gospel of Six Sigma at all of his professional stops, Perez never felt he had the right work environment to apply the methodology. That was until 2013 when he arrived at the Y's national resource office in Chicago, Ill. (Y-USA).

## About the YMCA

In the United States the Y is composed of more than 2,700 YMCA branches supported by approximately 19,000 full-time staff and 600,000 volunteers. Each year the Y engages 9 million youth and 13 million adults through programs, services, and initiatives focused on youth development, healthy living, and social responsibility. Y-USA, located in Chicago, serves as the national resource office for the Y. The youth development department is responsible for developing and supporting programs such as summer day camps, child care, leadership and academic enrichment offerings, food programs, and more.





## Bringing Six Sigma Into Youth Development

As the vice president of youth development, family enrichment, and social responsibility for Y-USA, Perez leads a department that delivers services to local Ys across the country. He found supporting his project managers was difficult, particularly tracking the progress of myriad projects throughout the department. “We needed a single way of managing and tracking our projects, and Six Sigma was selected,” he said.

Perez asked Erin Reuland, manager of administration for youth development and social responsibility for Y-USA, in early 2014 to find a trainer who could deliver a week-long Green Belt-level Six Sigma course. The goal was to present a course that was adapted specifically for the nonprofit service sector. “Because of Jorge’s experience with Six Sigma, he wanted our team to jump on board with training from someone who could teach us how this (Six Sigma) was beneficial to a nonprofit,” Reuland said.

The Y hired consulting organization Perfect Formula, LLC to lead the training. Reuland and other key staff members met with George Chemers, owner of Perfect Formula, to help customize a training course designed to meet three goals:

- Provide training on lean and Six Sigma tools and techniques.
- Teach youth development staff to apply these methods to improve business processes.
- Help course participants put their learning into practice by creating and completing real projects to improve effectiveness and efficiency.

Chemers said adapting Six Sigma training for the nonprofit services environment was a novel idea, which meant the key was to create Y-specific examples in the training materials while also defining terminology—like DMAIC and SIPOC—up front that may be unfamiliar to those in the nonprofit sector.

### At a Glance: DMAIC and SIPOC

DMAIC	SIPOC
Define	Suppliers
Measure	Inputs
Analyze	Processes
Improve	Outputs
Control	Customers

Reuland said her colleagues were somewhat skeptical about Six Sigma in the beginning; however, that changed. “Once they got their hands dirty and started working with this in the training,” she said, “they realized it wasn’t really doing work differently, but organizing and documenting in a new way.”

One of the projects that allowed staff members to get their “hands dirty” during the training course focused on upgrading the Y’s summer day camp program.

### Leading a Day Camp Upgrade

For many years, the Y’s flagship youth development program has been its summer day camp offered by local Ys to provide a fun, safe, and educational experience to school-aged children during the summer school break. Typical day camp activities involve arts and crafts, songs, field trips, and more.

“When people think of our work, and specifically youth development, they think of day camp and look at the Y as a pioneer in this field,” said Jarret Royster, senior vice president of operations at the YMCA of Greater Boston. “But, there was a general feeling in our network that day camp had become stale.”

Royster, who was formerly the director of urban and education development at Y-USA, said an upgrade of the day camp program had become a strategic priority in 2014. Soon after, the youth development staff began wrestling with many key questions, including:

- What is wrong with our model now?
- Where do we want our program to be in the future?
- What are the deviations between now and in the future?

Royster said the answers to these questions were lacking at first, but staff members chose Six Sigma to tackle these important questions.

Prior to introducing Six Sigma at Y-USA, Perez said a program upgrade was typically only the result of a group of people choosing to simply refurbish what already existed. But rather than simply refreshing the manuals and conducting training, the project team used Six Sigma tools to discover that the culture created for the kids was the largest ingredient that was lacking for the delivery of high-quality day camp experiences.

Upgrading the program would ensure every child learned something every single day at camp, made a friend at camp, and formed a connection to the Y. Perez said the project team created tools and staff practices that encouraged a connection around the three factors identified as necessary for improving the day camp culture. The project goal was to disseminate the newly developed day camp program model to the movement (the local YMCA branches around the country that offer day camp) during the summer 2015, and to achieve a 75 percent adoption rate by 2017.

Since the day camp upgrade was a strategic plan priority, the project involved people from all areas of Y-USA—from fund

development to communications to training and leadership as well as the research and evaluations staff.

The project team developed a charter and discussed what would be involved in a significant, meaningful upgrade. They also brainstormed ideas of what could prevent local Ys from adopting the new program. This was accomplished through a fishbone diagram, as shown in Figure 1.

Reuland said the fishbone diagram was a great exercise to complete as a project team. “It helped us look at our ‘pain’ areas for



Figure 1: Fishbone Diagrams Identified Barriers to Adoption of the Upgrade

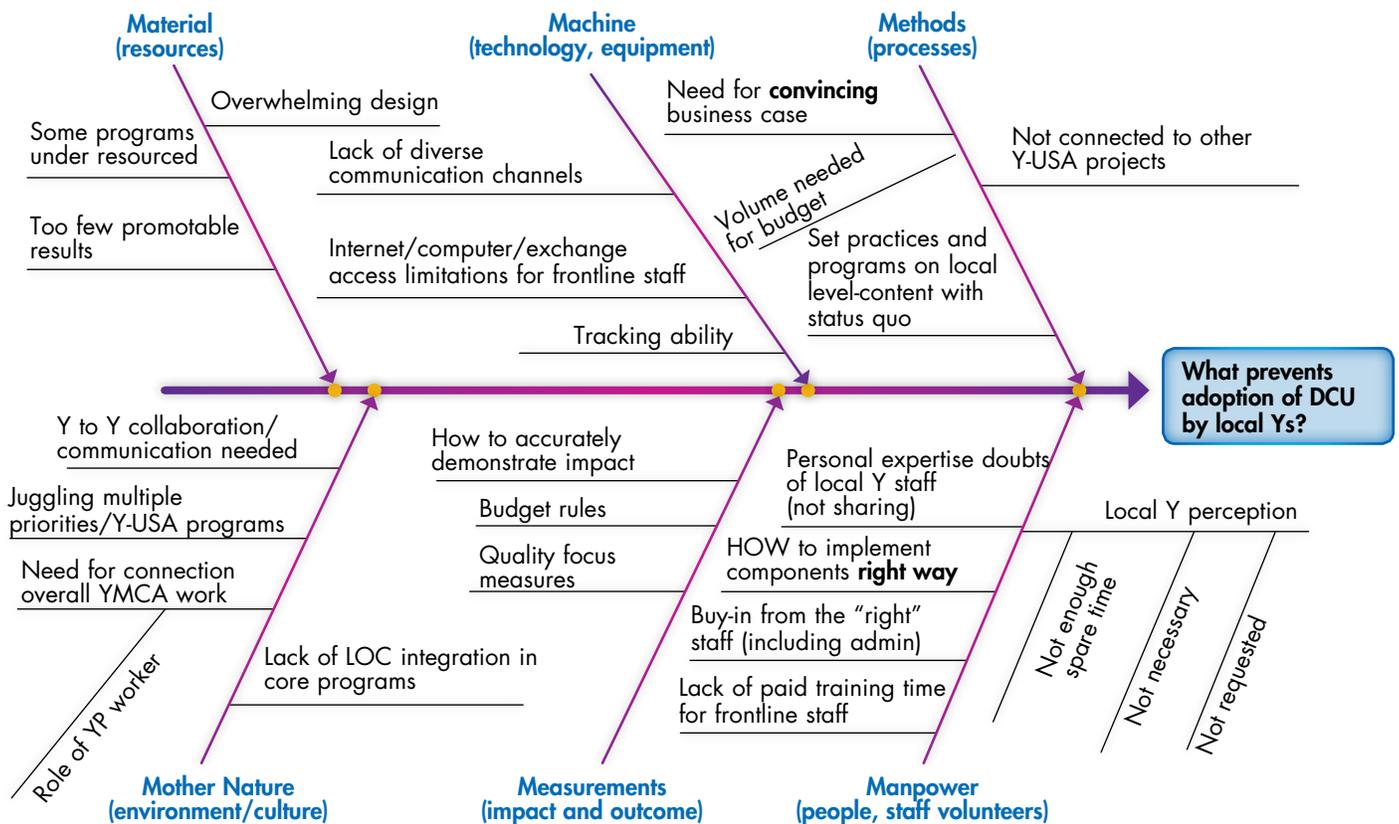


Figure 2: Process Maps Show the Path to Adoption of Upgrade



the issues/barriers that our project faced,” she said. Some of those potential barriers included a lack of paid training time for frontline staff and buy-in from staff members.

The team analyzed feedback from the pilot phase conducted in the summer 2014. Local Y staff members involved in the pilot reported that it was their best experience in delivering the day camp programs. Parents of pilot program participants related similar glowing feedback, including how children shared how much they enjoyed the activities, the new friends made, things they learned, and how they were looking forward to going back the next day. Scores for parent engagement with the program increased and branch CEOs sent in notes expressing support and to keep up the great work.



In addition to the fishbone diagrams, the project team developed process maps, which the team referred to as consumption chains, to illustrate the path to adoption of the improved program. As shown in Figure 2, this path included six steps: commit, become familiar, rally your staff, learn, implement, and remind and celebrate.

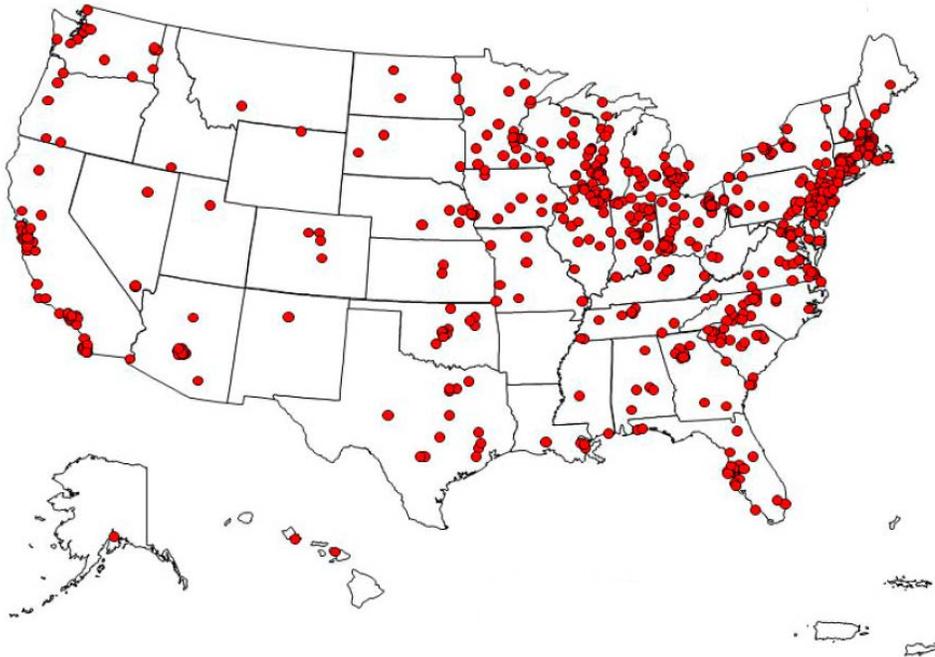
### Reaching Year 1 Goals

Upon studying the feedback from the pilot phase and making some changes to strengthen the day camp offering, leadership rolled out the upgraded model to the movement for the summer 2015 programs. The new offering featured a wide variety of strategies to meet the goals of building a sense of achievement, creating a feeling of belonging and encouraging relationships among day camp participants.

### Approaching Projects With Greater Discipline

Perez said his department is now more data-driven and organized than prior to its adoption of the Six Sigma methodology. In the past, people made decisions with a combination of instinct and data that suited their argument rather than using data to drive toward a solution. But Perez said that’s no longer the case. “The fact that we came up with a day camp solution that no one was thinking about was exactly what we needed to do,” he said.

Figure 3: YMCA Day Camp Dispersal in the Summer 2015



Royster echoed the sentiments, confirming a shift to a more disciplined structure is now in place. “In the absence of Six Sigma there is ‘just winging it,’ and frankly wasting resources and time,” he said. Royster notices more discipline and rigor in how department members approach their work—not just with technical tools, but with what he calls “Six Sigma minds and eyes.” He said he’s detected a new confidence within the staff, who believe the work they are doing is creating the kind of change that has a positive effect on members.

The Six Sigma methodology also helps the youth development staff communicate better with those working in other Y-USA departments. Reuland said Six Sigma principles enable staff to organize their work and communicate more effectively with co-workers in other departments. She and her colleagues use the DMAIC model to share project information with colleagues who might not have first-hand knowledge of her department’s goals or the selected path forward on a particular project. “We are able to communicate with others in a way that makes sense and clearly defines what their role is in terms of the bigger project goal,” Reuland said.

### Looking Ahead With Six Sigma

The upgraded program met its goal of at least 40 percent adoption when 357 Ys offered day camp in summer 2015 (Figure 3 shows Y day camp dispersal throughout the United States). The goal increases to 60 percent in 2016, and then 75 percent in 2017. “We didn’t allow the old ‘rut’ of upgrades to dictate what we were going to do in this case,” Perez said. “What came out of our process was profoundly different than anything we had ever done before.”

The success of the day camp upgrade has positively affected other program upgrades, including after school programs. Reuland said the experience with day camp

completely changed how the after school program team is working together, noting improvement projects and changes are planned out in a much more structured way.

“We feel good about piloting [the upgraded after school program] because we spent enough time doing the prototyping before moving into our pilot phase,” she said. “The first project [day camp upgrade] really set the bar for this upgrade and all the ones to follow.”

While the youth development department has made great strides in adopting the Six Sigma methodology, Perez said they are now at a 3 or 4 on a scale of 1 to 10 in terms of integrating the methodology. His vision is to fully implement a Six Sigma process involving Black Belts and using more sophisticated measurement tools.

“We understand that we are not done with this journey,” he said. “We have just scratched the surface.”

### For More Information

- To learn more about the Six Sigma initiatives at Y-USA, contact Jorge Perez at [Jorge.Perez@ymca.net](mailto:Jorge.Perez@ymca.net).
- For more information on the Six Sigma training provided by Perfect Formula, LLC, contact George Chemers at [george.chemers@perfectformulallc.com](mailto:george.chemers@perfectformulallc.com).
- Additional details about Six Sigma are available at [asq.org/learn-about-quality/six-sigma/overview/overview.html](http://asq.org/learn-about-quality/six-sigma/overview/overview.html).
- To view this and other case studies, visit the ASQ Knowledge Center at [asq.org/knowledge-center/case-studies](http://asq.org/knowledge-center/case-studies).

### About the Author

**Janet Jacobsen** is a freelance writer specializing in quality and compliance topics. A graduate of Drake University, she resides in Cedar Rapids, IA.