



*Guaranteed Project Success*

## **The Master Black Belt: Hire or Consult?**

By Michael Reames and Gabriel Kemeny

Recently, two potential clients posed the partners at ProcessGPS an interesting question: We recognize that we need someone with Master Black Belt skills in our organization. Should our organization seek and hire this person, or use a consulting resource on a contract basis? The answer is not immediately obvious, and it certainly depends on knowing more details of the client's current state. Nevertheless, it's a fair question with broad implications and deserves a conscientious reply.

First, we should be clear about the skills and characteristics of a Master Black Belt (MBB). In a sentence, a Master Black Belt is a trainer and coach for Black Belt Project Leaders, as well as a trusted guide for the senior leadership in the field of Lean Six Sigma. Thus the MBB is a key person in those organizations that are sustaining Process Excellence for the long term.

Lean Six Sigma critics allege that LSS is not always a good fit for an organization. Certainly there are some firms, frequently mid-size or smaller, or autonomous units of larger organizations, that struggle to support and sustain a complex implementation. Nevertheless, the contention that LSS is a bad fit is inappropriate. The larger issue is that Lean Six Sigma is not always the correct approach to resolving all process excellence issues. The spectrum of process improvement approaches span the simple quick wins and "Just-Do-It" for obvious actions to reduce waste or enhance process flow; to the straightforward Kaizen-like method for cleaning up a process to achieve maximum efficiency; to statistical root-cause analysis (to reduce variability in a process); to complete process re-design or new process creation. In fact, there are even good project management candidates for strategic decisions to upgrade the technology (for example, new servers or SAP implementation). So don't believe LSS practitioners who claim that traditional DMAIC (Define-Measure-Analyze-Improve-Control) is always the right path to an improved process; these well-intentioned folks have a "hammer" and will use it to pound in any "nail."

This suggests that an organization that wants to improve the way it manages processes and is sincerely interested in responding to the Voice of the Customer will come up with a customized way of deploying LSS that works for them. This brings us back to the dilemma of the MBB skills required: hire a permanent MBB or contract for MBB resources from a consulting firm.

The Master Black Belts at ProcessGPS have served in both capacities, and therefore are able to see both advantages and disadvantages to each approach. The desirable characteristics of a Master Black Belt may be adequately served by either a permanent hire or a contracted consultant. Our compilation of the skills required include:

## Desirable characteristics and skills/qualifications of an MBB Candidate

- Knowledge of how to create a Lean Six Sigma infra-structure
  - Program Management Office
  - Process Steering Committee / Governance Council / Quality Council
- Knowledge of project selection/prioritization process
  - Linking strategy to projects
  - Factoring in resource availability/constraints
  - Appropriate application of LSS approach to projects (vs. “Just-Do-It”, project management, etc.)
- Advanced knowledge of:
  - DMAIC
  - DFSS
  - Process Management
  - Lean (Kaizen, Value Stream, Muda, Takt, etc.)
  - Theory of Constraints
  - Statistics (validating cause/effect relationships)
- Advanced facilitation skills, including ability to resolve conflict and address culture change issues
- People leadership:
  - Ability to influence individuals who are not in the management hierarchy
  - Collaboration & influencing skills
- Executive training and guidance
- Project and team leader coaching
- Train-the-trainer capabilities
- Outstanding verbal & written communication skills
- Process thinking
- Ability to set up process to certify LSS resources (BB, GB, etc.)
- Skilled in use of Minitab or similar statistical processing software; also Excel, PowerPoint, Word, MS Project
- Certified by a reputable source; certificate available/ reference-able
- Enthusiastic role model for Quality and Customer Focus
- Someone with the potential to lead the organization
- Demonstrated success in achieving productivity gains and cost reductions on projects coached

With these characteristics in mind, let us now proceed to a consideration of the question to hire or to consult an MBB. The following table was initially based on a set of force-field analyses, then combined into a concise document laying out the advantages and disadvantages of each.

**Hire Permanent MBB vs. Use MBB Consulting Resource (contract basis) vs. “Best of Both Worlds”**

Potential Advantages of hiring a permanent MBB	Potential Advantages of hiring a short-term, outside MBB
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ If your implementation is underway, he/she can help you to sustain it as a Subject Matter Expert (SME)</li> <li>→ Can position him/her as a future leader of the organization</li> <li>→ A hired MBB can acquire additional skills needed while on the job (if some areas are lacking)</li> <li>→ He/She can be embedded and invested in the organizational culture</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ If you require implementation program management in addition to subject matter expertise, a consultant MBB is likely to be more skilled at this.</li> <li>→ He/She is likely to be listened to – outside expert in a narrowly-defined field</li> <li>→ Organization may be able to find an MBB with a greater variety of experiences, and one who is very knowledgeable about best practices</li> <li>→ It’s an easier, short-term decision to make; If not the best fit, it’s easy to cut losses quickly</li> <li>→ An experienced consultant MBB may train an in-house resource (i.e., no particular need to hire an additional person if a candidate has good potential)</li> <li>→ Ability to use expert on an as-needed basis: you can intensify/increase or diminish the hours you require of the consultant</li> </ul>
Potential Disadvantages of hiring a permanent MBB	Potential Disadvantages of hiring a short-term, outside MBB
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ It’s more difficult and may take longer to find the “right” one</li> <li>→ If the hire turns out not to be the best fit, the organization may have to live with the choice</li> <li>→ “Rarely a prophet in one’s own land” (harder to get buy-in)</li> <li>→ You’re making a larger long-term investment (salary, benefits, paid time off, etc.)</li> <li>→ Successful consultant MBBs are not seeking MBB full-time positions, and are likely to have broader experience than MBBs who are not.</li> <li>→ If hiring for the long-term, you desire someone with multi-company experience in LSS &amp; program management. While this could be a driving force if you have someone with this skill, it may be more difficult to find such a person.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Appropriate skill sets may not be a perfect match</li> <li>→ If MBB is supporting your organization on a part-time basis, he/she may not always be available when you need him/her</li> <li>→ It’s more expensive in the short-term (partly offset by the fact that you don’t need him/her permanently)</li> </ul>
<p>A possible additional alternative: Hire a short-term MBB resource while searching for a permanent MBB</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A good outside and experienced consultant may be the best resource to help your organization get started or to get re-energized</li> <li>• This alternative gives the organization the time to complete a comprehensive search for the perfect-fit MBB</li> <li>• It allows the organization to make progress on the LSS initiative while you’re finding the right person</li> <li>• The organization benefits from various perspectives, many of which can be handed down/transferred to the eventual hire</li> <li>• The outside MBBs can be considered as a continuing resource, on your budget and schedule, to include shifting to different type of consulting</li> <li>• It’s more straightforward to manage limited resources and to ensure that you’re proceeding as planned</li> </ul>	

In summary, there are very good cases to be made for either hiring a permanent MBB or using the services of a contracted consultant MBB. The specific answer must be answered by each organization struggling with this dilemma. For some, a combined approach may help them to make progress in their improvement efforts while taking the time to find an optimal match for a permanent hire.



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