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Media Release

HRC senior NCO becomes Army's first enlisted Lean Six Sigma Master Black Belt

Pull quote: 'Lean Six Sigma is one tool that that the Army uses to improve processes and get the most bang for our buck!'

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FORT KNOX, Ky. — A senior non-commissioned officer at the U.S. Army Human Resources Command ranks among the Army's top "efficiency experts," but being the Army's first enlisted Lean Six Sigma "Master Black Belt" puts him in a class by himself.

A Master Black Belt is the highest level of expert in Army process improvement. Since the Lean Six Sigma program began in 2005, only 50 people had earned this certification, and this Soldier was honored March 15 for joining their ranks at No. 51.

Master Sgt. Shane Wentz lives and breathes Lean Six Sigma, the Army's equivalent of "build a better mousetrap." He teaches and mentors LSS practitioners within HRC's directorates so they can find ways to improve their business practices to better serve HRC's customers: Soldiers, veterans and family members.

"In everything we do these days, we must be cognizant of how much it costs — in dollars, time and manpower," Wentz said. "Lean Six Sigma is one tool that that the Army uses to improve processes and get the most bang for our buck! It takes us out of our comfort zone and makes us look at things from a different perspective."

To be certified as a Master Black Belt you must:

1. attend a three-week course taught by the Army at Fort Belvoir, Va.;

2. pass a four-hour exam (“The toughest test I have ever taken, including college work completed during my MBA program!”)
3. complete two Black Belt-level projects;
4. mentor two Black Belt-level projects to completion; and
5. teach the Army four-week Black Belt course of instruction *twice*.

The road to earning Master Black Belt was long and often difficult, but it was extremely rewarding, he said. In addition to the knowledge and the satisfaction he gained throughout the certification process, Wentz received kudos from both HRC commander Maj. Gen. Gina Farrissee and HRC deputy commander Brig. Gen. Marcia Anderson.

“We’re heading into a very volatile and uncertain time, and a lot of constrained resources,” said Anderson, who provides Lean Six Sigma oversight at HRC. “It makes it even more important that we have people ... who are willing to look at things a little bit differently, who are going to think ... outside the box and who are willing to question the way we’ve always done things. It’s really important that we be as efficient and effective as we can be as public servants because I think the American public and our fellow Soldiers and civilians depend on us to do that.”

It was work outside of the Army that sparked Wentz’s interest in Lean Six Sigma. While working on his masters of business administration about five years ago, Wentz did some case studies on companies that used Lean Six Sigma. He said he “found it fascinating.”

Wentz began doing Lean Six Sigma in the Army only about a year and a half ago, and just started doing Lean Six Sigma full time in May 2010 when he went from Retention and Reclassification Branch in HRC’s Enlisted Personnel Management Directorate to the Strategic Initiatives Group, or SIG.

The challenge was how to fit earning a Master Black Belt into an already-full work schedule.

“I tried to have it impact work as little as possible. Of course, teaching the class impacts work ... because you’re out of the office while you’re teaching; the other people in your office kind of have to pick up your workload while you’re out,” Wentz said. “It helped me tremendously. It freed me up to concentrate solely on the class versus (going) back and forth from the class to the office.”

Then, of course, there were the late nights of studying for black-belt and MBB tests along the way.

The best part, according to Wentz, was working with other Soldiers and civilians both inside and outside the command to improve Army processes.

"In just a handful of the projects we worked on," Wentz said, "we saved the Army, in cost saving and cost avoidance, over \$20 million a year by improving the processes."

Sidebar:

Just what is an Army Master Black Belt?

The Lean Six Sigma Master Black Belt is a full-time dedicated position reporting to the Deployment Director (or in some cases, to the Process Owner). The MBB is the organization's in-house expert for disseminating knowledge and training/coaching Black Belts (and Green Belts when appropriate). Additionally, the Master Black Belt takes a direct leadership role in leading complex, enterprise-wide or strategic-level LSS projects. Only Army-certified MBBs are eligible to teach the Army LSS programs of instruction.

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