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## Human Sigma

### Managing the Employee-Customer Encounter

#### THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

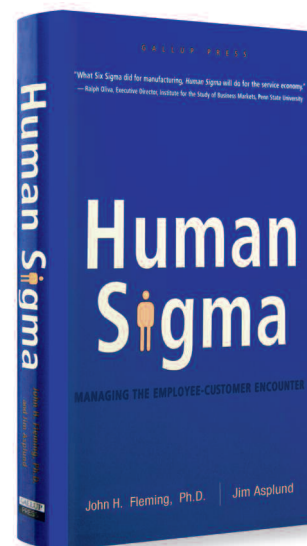
Six Sigma changed the face of manufacturing quality, creating excellence by reducing variance in finished goods, revolutionizing businesses and boosting profits. Now, HumanSigma is poised to do the same for sales and service organizations.

*Human Sigma* offers an innovative, research-based approach to one of the toughest challenges businesses face today: how to drive success by effectively managing the moments when employees interact with customers. Based on research spanning 10 million employees and 10 million customers around the globe, the HumanSigma approach combines a proven method for assessing the health of the employee-customer encounter with a disciplined process for improving it.

Offering essential ideas for today's global business leaders, the authors show how sales and service companies can flourish in the new global economy. They reveal a profoundly different method for managing human systems for growth. Blending strategic analysis with hands-on, practical steps and advice, this summary will change how you view your work, your employees and your customers forever.

#### IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- Why employee and customer experiences must be managed together — not as separate entities.
- How emotions drive and shape the employee-customer encounter.
- Why the employee-customer encounter must be measured and managed at the local level.
- How employee and customer engagement interact to drive enhanced financial performance.
- Why sustainable improvement in the employee-customer encounter requires disciplined local action coupled with a companywide commitment to changing how employees are recruited, positioned in roles, rewarded and recognized, and how they are managed.



by John H. Fleming, Ph.D.,  
and Jim Asplund

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# THE COMPLETE SUMMARY: HUMAN SIGMA

by John H. Fleming, Ph.D., and Jim Asplund

**The authors:** John H. Fleming, Ph.D., is a principal of Gallup and chief scientist for Gallup's customer engagement and HumanSigma practices. Prior to joining Gallup, Fleming spent six years as a faculty member at the University of Minnesota. He received his doctorate in social psychology from Princeton University.

Jim Asplund is a principal of Gallup and chief scientist for strengths-based development. Prior to joining Gallup, Asplund spent eight years as a policy expert and lobbyist at the Minnesota Legislature. He earned his master's degree in public policy from the University of Minnesota.

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## The Terminator School of Management

Arnold Schwarzenegger fans will recall the harrowing image from the apocalyptic opening scene of *The Terminator*. It's the Year of Darkness, 2029.

The machines — created by an advanced form of artificial intelligence called Skynet that accidentally becomes self-aware — have concluded that they must erase humans from the face of the planet, replacing them with predictable but unfeeling, efficient, and relentless copies of themselves. The machines have decided that humans are not only unnecessary, but they are expendable. They add no value in the vision of the future the machines seek to create.

### Terminator Management

Terminator Management is an institutionalized mindset that views people — customers *and* employees — as a necessary evil; a nuisance; or, in extreme cases, as adversaries in doing business. Rather than viewing people as the reason a business exists, the Terminator School of Management views them as impediments to business that breed inefficiency, cost and errors.

Terminator Management sees employees as little more than a cost it needs to reduce or a mistake just waiting to happen.

### New Rules

Experts offer a new set of rules and a different way of thinking about managing your company's complex human systems, which can serve as an antidote to Terminator Management. It's about a model and an

approach called HumanSigma.

HumanSigma offers a disciplined approach to measuring, managing and improving the performance of your most volatile and valuable assets — your customers and employees — to drive financial performance. ●

## Quality Control

The accounting and financial reporting systems modern businesses use have failed to keep up with the changing nature of value creation. By focusing on tangible assets, current accounting systems implicitly undervalue human contributions to the enterprise, which are primarily intangible things such as creative branding strategies, research and development, and labor productivity.

A recent study revealed that an estimated 80 percent of the market value of the average S&P 500 company is made up of its intangible assets — the company's brand, its customer base and levels of engagement, the talent of employees, and innovation and R&D, just to name a few of the most crucial elements. Though most executives recognize the importance of these intangible assets, it's much more difficult to justify investing in them without an accepted means of accounting for the success or failure of these investments.

### Toward an Alternate Approach: HumanSigma

HumanSigma, like its namesake Six Sigma, builds on the best principles of that methodology, offering a strategy for optimizing business performance by reducing variability and improving performance on key indicators.

The beauty and simplicity of Six Sigma is that it integrates a universal and consistent method to count quality



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service@summary.com

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Rebecca S. Clement, Publisher; Sarah T. Dayton, Editor in Chief; Andrew Clancy, Senior Editor; Christine Wright, Senior Graphic Designer; Chris Lauer, Contributing Editor

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defects with a disciplined process to eliminate them. The HumanSigma model overlays these same basic process elements onto the human systems of your business by providing a consistent method to assess and monitor the effectiveness of the employee-customer encounter and a disciplined process to manage and improve it. ●

### Human Systems and Vital Signs

Just like your regular visits to the physician, an organization requires a feedback system to evaluate, regulate and maintain its overall health. And, just like you, organizations have vital signs that need to be regularly monitored. An organization's vital signs serve as diagnostic indicators of how effectively it's addressing its key constituencies, executing its strategies, maintaining its economic viability, and how likely it is to grow.

If heart rate, respiration and blood pressure are the vital signs of the human organism, then in sales and service organizations, the corresponding vital signs of the employee-customer encounter are the health of its human systems: its customer relationships (heart rate), employee relationships (respiration) and overall financial viability (blood pressure).

Separately, these vital signs provide important but incomplete diagnostic information about the effectiveness of the organization's employee-customer encounter.

The employee perspective usually lies within the domain of the human resources department. Though the encounter between an employee and a customer represents the touchstone of value creation in sales and service companies, human resources departments are rarely involved in strategic decision making, marketing campaigns or advertising efforts, outside of providing input about staffing levels and costs. This is unfortunate. Employees who interact with customers are the face and the soul of the brand and are intimately involved in the front-line execution of the brand promise, yet they play little role in its formulation and development.

This brings us to the first new rule of HumanSigma management:

**Rule 1: You can't measure and manage employee and customer experiences as separate entities; they must be managed together under a single organizational entity.**

Only when these organizational systems and their vital signs are brought together and empirically linked can a true picture of the health of the employee-customer encounter be understood and managed. What this means in practice is that the responsibility for measuring and

### Measure What Counts

Although it is appealing to simplify how you think about the health of your employee and customer relationships, remember that "not everything that can be counted counts." You need to be careful, deliberate and informed, because what you measure is a crucial component of your future success. What you measure must be more comprehensive than mere satisfaction and broader than simple advocacy.

monitoring the health of a company's employee and customer constituencies should reside within a single organizational structure. This structure should have a clearly identified champion who has the authority to manage change across the broad range of organizational activities that affect the employee-customer encounter. ●

### Feelings Are Facts

More than 75 years ago, William I. Thomas, a sociologist at the University of Chicago, wrote, "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences." In other words, a person's definition of the situation — that is, how they perceive that situation and what they define to be true about it — determines how he or she will react to it. Thomas was saying that though the objective elements of a situation are important, the subjective experience of those objective elements — what the situation feels like — is what truly matters to people. Perception *is* reality.

Too often business leaders get caught up in the facts of their businesses and fail to appreciate what matters to employees and customers. For them, reality is not only the objective experience they have with companies but also how they perceive and interpret that experience — their feelings about it.

In the employee-customer encounter, one of the most intriguing factors that can significantly affect customers' and employees' perceptions of the world around them is their emotions.

We can sum this all up with the second new rule of HumanSigma Management:

**Rule 2: Feelings are facts, and emotions frame the employee-customer encounter.** ●

### Customer Engagement and Emotional Attachment

Studies reveal that engaging customers on an

emotional level has a significant financial benefit.

There are four key dimensions to a customer's emotional attachment to a company. Each dimension represents a specific set of activities that meet customers' emotional needs.

### The Emotional Attachment Hierarchy

The first and foundational dimension of emotional attachment is *confidence*. Is the company trustworthy? But confidence alone is not enough to build long-term, sustainable and emotionally connected customer relationships.

Beyond confidence lies *integrity*, the essential dimension of fair play. Does this company treat me the way I deserve to be treated? If something goes awry, can I count on this company to fix it quickly?

The next emotional requirement is *pride*, a sense of positive association and identification with the company. Pride goes beyond simplistic notions of self-presentational, status or “badge” qualities of association to deeper levels of shared values between the customer and the company. Customers who feel pride are proud to be a customer not because of what their association with a company says to others, but because of what it says to them about themselves. Customers' associations with companies not only convey information about them to others, but they also help define and sharpen their own self-concepts.

The fourth dimension, and the ultimate expression of emotional attachment, is *passion*. A passionate customer describes his or her relationship with the company as irreplaceable and a perfect fit for him or her. Passionate customers are rare, but they represent the epitome of customer connectedness. They are customers for life and are worth their weight in gold. ●

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## Emotional Attachment: Confidence and Integrity

The foundational dimension of emotional attachment — confidence — is also the most basic. Will this company deliver on its promises, day in and day out?

Confidence is the bedrock upon which higher levels of emotional attachment are built. But confidence alone is not enough to build long-term, sustainable and emotionally connected customer relationships. It's only the starting point for an emotional connection.

A company's ability to engender confidence in its customers begins with its ability to consistently deliver a customer's basic requirements for that industry and the more specific elements of the company's brand promise.

Gallup's research has shown that companies that fail to build confidence have a much tougher time engaging customers than companies in which customer confidence is solid. For customers, the consistency between what a company promises and what it actually delivers is key to building confidence.

### Integrity

Social psychological literature identifies at least three different types of fairness or justice: *distributive* fairness, which addresses how resources are distributed; *procedural* fairness, which covers the processes and systems that are used to determine how resources are allocated; and *interactional* fairness, which encompasses how people are treated at an individual level. All three types of fairness come into play at different times, and all are important. However, from a customer's perspective, distributive and procedural fairness carry the greatest weight because they represent chronic — or structural — issues. Customers' perceptions of transactional fairness, in contrast, can vary from interaction to interaction and therefore represent transient — or acute — issues.

### Three Types of Fairness

*Distributive fairness* deals with how companies allocate resources among individuals. With distributive fairness, three rules are possible, relating to equity, equality and need.

Fair treatment under the equity rule means that the company should reciprocate and distribute resources based on what the individual has invested in the relationship. In contrast, fair treatment under the equality rule means that a company should distribute resources equally among all customers, or “Treat me the way you treat *all* other customers.” Finally, fair treatment under the need rule means that the company should distribute resources based on individual needs, or, “Treat me like *no other* customer.”

*Procedural fairness* covers whether customers feel that your company's policies and procedures are fair and equitable.

The search for customer centricity is really a search for procedural fairness. If customers perceive that a company is taking advantage of them or designing policies and procedures inequitably, their engagement will quickly erode.

*Interactional fairness* encompasses how a company treats people at an individual level. At issue is whether your employees make interacting with the company enjoyable. ●

### Emotional Attachment: Pride and Passion

Pride functions on multiple levels. The power of the pride dimension is not just what doing business with a particular company tells others about me — it's what being a customer tells me about *me*.

People embrace the brands they buy and the companies they do business with as symbols that help them define their own sense of who they are. Because all of us feel less than complete in some aspect of our lives, there are limitless opportunities for customers to connect with brands and companies as a means to building their desired self-identity. The relationships we build with the companies we choose to patronize profoundly affect how we construct and sharpen our self-concepts.

#### Passion

Passion represents the ultimate expression of emotional attachment. A passionate customer uses expressions like “It’s irreplaceable” and “It’s a perfect fit for me!” to describe his or her relationship with your company. For these customers, the number of potential alternatives they’d consider using is zero.

Passionate customers look to your company to set the standard for other companies to follow. These customers are relatively rare — they make up only 18 percent of all customers in Gallup’s customer database — but they represent the zenith of customer connectedness. They are customers for life and are a significant financial resource and annuity for companies.

Not only are passionate customers truly committed “ambassadors” for your brand, but they hold the keys to building greater levels of passion throughout your customer population. ●

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### Win Their Brains and Their Hearts Will Follow

A functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) machine measures the flow of oxygenated blood to various parts of the brain on the assumption that greater activity in a particular brain area increases the need for oxygen in that area. Because they tend to show up as bright colors on the resulting brain scan images, the areas with enhanced blood flow are often described as “lighting up.” Areas that light up are experiencing intense neural activity.

So imagine that you could peek inside the heads of your customers as they think about your company or

your products, services or brands. What would they see? Would the brain activity of customers with a strong emotional connection to your company vary from that of customers who are indifferent? To find an answer, researchers recently used fMRI to examine real-time brain activity in customers of a Japanese luxury retailer.

When they analyzed the results of the brain scans, they found the brains of customers who were highly engaged with the retailer were more active while they were thinking about the company than were the brains of customers with lower levels of engagement.

They also found that the brains of customers who were most passionate about the retailer were considerably more active while thinking about the luxury retailer than were the brains of customers with lower levels of passion.

When they think about a company, customers who are highly engaged and the subset of those customers who are strongly passionate about the company engage a specific set of brain regions associated with emotional processing and storing emotional memories, as well as areas related to facial recognition and facial memory. This provides strong evidence that the emotional centers of the brain — as evidenced by neural activity — play a crucial role in building and sustaining customer engagement. ●

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### Employee Engagement

New York University professor Baruch Lev has written extensively about intangible assets and how to account for their contributions to company market value. His research has found that intangible assets contribute much of the value in most firms and that the earnings generated by intangible assets are a better predictor of stock market returns than either accounting earnings or cash flows.

Researchers have found that *engaged* employees are the main source of much of these intangible assets. When employees are engaged — or emotionally and psychologically committed to the firm — businesses perform more efficiently, and when businesses perform more efficiently, employees become even more engaged.

A recent study of 2,178 business units from 10 companies in six industries found that engagement predicts performance in key areas — including customer engagement, employee retention, sales and profit — better than performance predicts engagement. In the search for a good measure of the source of Lev’s intangible assets, one needs to look no further than the engagement of the firm’s employees.

Just as engaged customers are among a company’s most profitable patrons and passionate advocates,

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engaged employees are a company's most productive and efficient workers.

Among the variables that discriminate between highly productive workplaces and those that are unproductive is the quality of the local workplace manager and his or her ability to meet a core set of employees' emotional requirements.

Primary within these conditions are emotional elements that reveal our basic human needs: to be recognized as individuals and to contribute. At a local level, managers can influence employees' most basic needs by setting clear expectations and providing needed resources. More than this, they can energize their employees by showing them that they care personally and professionally. ●

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### Engaging Your Employees

Companies can change and focus employees' behavior in more positive directions by engaging employees' hearts and minds. A careful look at more than 10 million interviews with employees have led researchers to four core principles of employee engagement that when combined with the key principles of customer engagement, begin to sketch out a road map for navigating the terrain of HumanSigma:

- **Manage by outcomes, not behaviors.** Great organizations and managers view excellence within a role as achieving the right outcomes, not just conforming and executing the steps of the job the right way.
- **Liberate, don't legislate.** The most dramatic increases in productivity occur when companies allow workgroups to choose their own initiatives and focus on them.
- **Engagement is for everyone.** Almost every employee can become more engaged.
- **All politics is local.** Everyone from the boardroom to the mailroom is responsible for the quality of his or her workplace.

Employee engagement provides a starting point for improving organizational performance. Like politics, "all performance is local," and it varies from location to location and team to team within the same organization. Addressing that variation and its impact on overall organizational health is the key to managing your organization's HumanSigma. ●

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### The Scourge of Local Variation

The successful implementation of standardized processes, policies and other drivers of customer engagement that should be more or less constant across the enterprise

brings us to the consideration of exactly who is doing the implementing and how that implementation is being managed. For this reason, businesses must focus on reducing variability in local "people" processes (the "who" and "how" of implementation).

The power of an approach focusing on reducing local performance variability lies in its simplicity and flexibility, allowing each unit to identify and correct its own causes for disengagement. Any location can optimize its performance, regardless of its starting point. The lesson from research is not that a business in a "C" market can necessarily be as profitable as one in an "A" market, but rather that the "C" and "A" locations can improve considerably if they adapt to meeting the requirements of their customers and employees. No research suggests that the local conditions can be so bad that a given business unit cannot improve — or so good that a local unit cannot fail.

This brings us to the third new rule of HumanSigma management:

**Rule 3: Think globally, measure and act locally: You must measure and manage the employee-customer encounter locally.**

Do your current performance metrics go deep enough into your organization to provide local managers with the information they need to manage effectively? ●

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### HumanSigma

Employee engagement has a direct and measurable relationship to and impact on customer engagement. This brings us to the next rule of HumanSigma management:

**Rule 4: There is one number you need to know. We can quantify and summarize the effectiveness of the employee-customer encounter in a single performance metric — the HumanSigma metric — that is powerfully related to financial performance.** ●

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### The Strategy and Tactics of Human Sigma: Evaluate, Intervene and Encourage

HumanSigma's strategic objective is to optimize the vital signs of your company's human systems.

HumanSigma optimizes these vital signs by focusing on performance and change on two levels within the company: the enterprise level ("think globally") and the local level ("act locally"). This two-pronged approach requires a *system owner* for each of the critical human systems — employees and customers — paired with an effective change mechanism that can be driven down to

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the team level where the employee–customer encounter occurs and where real, sustainable change actually happens. These system owners should be coordinated by and partnered with a corporate HumanSigma champion charged with ensuring that these two dynamic systems are energized and optimized.

Consolidate responsibility for managing your company’s human systems under an executive champion — a “chief HumanSigma officer” — who has corporate support for broad-based change initiatives to improve HumanSigma performance. This individual must have a span of control that, at a minimum, extends to the customer and employee domains.

### The Tactics of HumanSigma

Achieving and maintaining excellence in human systems performance demands regular attention to three interrelated activities: evaluation, intervention and encouragement.

Meeting all of these demands, but particularly the demand for intervention, requires attention to a combination of *transactional* and *transformational* activities.

Transactional activities are those that recur regularly, but they tend to be more topical and short term in focus. Typical transactional interventions include activities such as periodic measurement, internal assessments and audits, education and training, brainstorming sessions, and action planning.

Transformational activities, in contrast, result in fundamental changes in the company’s human ecosystem. They address questions such as, Do we have the right people in the right roles? Are our compensation and reward systems properly aligned with our strategic objectives?

With that, we arrive at the fifth and final new rule of HumanSigma management:

**Rule 5: If you pray for potatoes, you had better grab the right hoe. Improvement in local HumanSigma performance requires deliberate and active intervention through attention to a combination of transactional and transformational intervention activities.** ●

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## The Demand for Evaluation

Engaging employees and customers — and driving HumanSigma performance — requires a year-round focus on changing behaviors, processes and systems to meet and anticipate these constituencies’ needs. This requires a total commitment from the leadership team down to frontline units and employees. To implement the right changes, a rigorous process of monitoring

engagement and defining appropriate support and activities is needed. Local units must be held accountable for their engagement levels, their successes should be celebrated and they should receive the support they need to increase engagement.

**Measurement Logistics.** Once you’ve established the overall goals of your HumanSigma program, it’s time to identify how often you should measure, how to build a measurement plan and how to conduct the measurement.

**Analysis.** Analysis helps leaders identify enterprise-level opportunities and prioritize actions at a macro level. Second, it encourages managers and workgroups to identify specific opportunities to respond to unique local issues.

**Identifying Performance Zones.** By identifying performance zones and tailoring interventions to current performance — a process called *adaptive intervention* — organizations can apply solution strategies that best fit a team’s current performance level.

**The Way Forward.** Once organizations have received baseline performance data, it’s important for them to develop a road map spanning a three-year period. ●

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## The Demand for Intervention

The intervention stage is where the organization’s commitment to HumanSigma principles is tested, and it’s arguably the most difficult. But the intervention stage is also where the seeds of dramatic organizational change are planted. An effective HumanSigma intervention process begins with orienting employees toward the need for and benefits of change, as well as the reasons for selecting a particular intervention activity instead of others.

### Transactional Activities in Intervention

Here are four transactional activities in intervention:

**Brand Promise Alignment.** If you believe that your front-line employees play a crucial role as brand ambassadors and are truly the face of your brand in the marketplace, then an obvious place to begin an intervention process is with the brand promise itself. What is your company’s brand promise? How well-known is it throughout the company?

**Action Planning.** For action planning to be effective, it must be completed in a timely manner, usually within one month of receiving local HumanSigma performance feedback. The specific elements of local unit-level action planning are often best left to the local units.

**Action Planning Review.** Carefully reviewing, critiquing and modifying a unit's action plans can increase its likelihood of success and reduce the likelihood that the process will frustrate the team. The review should be regular and thorough.

**Customer Advisory Boards.** How can local units regularly engage in deep conversations with customers and customer-facing employees in a cost-effective way? A simple solution is for each unit to form a customer advisory board that meets on a regular basis.

### Transformational Activities in Intervention

Just as seeds planted in rich, fertile soil and nourished with sunshine and water will grow faster, stronger and healthier than seeds sown on barren land and left to languish on their own, so too will your improvement efforts gain greater traction if you plant them in a more "fertile" organizational soil. The goal of transformational interventions is to create this kind of environment within your company.

Creating a culture of accountability is one of the most important transformational interventions any company can implement.

A second transformational activity is to supplement your existing work force by selecting new associates who have an increased likelihood of success and performance at excellence. ●

## The Demand for Encouragement

In the helter-skelter pace of our day-to-day business lives, it's all too easy to forget the adage that you can attract more bees with honey than vinegar. But we should all strive to remember that success must be encouraged, celebrated and rewarded. To that end, high-performing HumanSigma units should be recognized — and not just the managers or executives who run the units, but the entire team. And because the financial payoff of HumanSigma management accrues to those units that improve their HumanSigma position as well as those that consistently perform at very high levels, it's also important to recognize those that improve the most.

Celebrating successes helps institutionalize improvement by establishing the language and culture of engagement. Consistent enterprisewide support is necessary to maintain positive momentum, and cheerleading and emphasizing initiative are important means of sustaining enthusiasm for the change process.

### Transactional and Transformational Activities in Encouragement

Transactional activities include preferred recognition, performance communication and celebration, local celebrations, and recognition and formalized rewards.

Transformational activities include peer group mentors; summits and retreats for top managers; performance linked to advancement and promotion; and case studies, such as a featured article in a company publication highlighting specific success stories. ●

## Conclusion

HumanSigma focuses on accepting our human nature and capitalizing on it to manage employees, motivate them, accelerate their development, and unleash innovation and productivity, all to ultimately engage the emotions of your most valuable asset — your customers.

The most important thing is to get started and keep working at it. Improvement takes time and mindful attention to the everyday facts of our lives. Each team needs to sketch out a vision for its future and work hard to build toward that vision. You will make mistakes, so your system needs to be tolerant of missteps if your organization hopes to optimize its performance for the long haul. Managing the employee-customer encounter is just plain hard work. It involves measuring the right things in the right ways, taking deliberate and disciplined action to improve each local team's performance, and celebrating your successes.

What works best for your organization must ultimately be determined by the employees who work there. The answers are not easy. But researchers have noticed how the need to own your own improvement makes people more innovative, productive and confident. There is not a better set of characteristics for companies facing an unknown future. ●

### RECOMMENDED READING LIST

If you liked *Human Sigma*, you'll also like:

1. ***The Complexity Crisis* by John L. Mariotti.** In this far-reaching study, Mariotti shows corporate America that "keeping it simple" is the way to overcome the problems generated by systems, procedures and deadlines.
2. ***Making Strategy Work* by Lawrence G. Hrebiniak.** Strategy without execution is worthless. In this book, Hrebiniak offers a comprehensive disciplined process for making strategy work in the real world.
3. ***The 7 Hidden Reasons Employees Leave* by Leigh Branham.** Find out what organizations need to recognize and actively pursue in order to retain their best and brightest people.