A3 Management Process
A Brief Summary

Introduction

At Toyota,…...the way of thinking about problems and learning from them for more effective planning, decision-making, and execution is one of the secrets of Toyota's success. The process by which the company identifies, frames, and then acts on problems and challenges at all levels – perhaps the key to its entire system of developing talent and continually deepening its knowledge and capabilities – can be found in the structure of its A3 process.

Many elements of the Toyota system have been held up as the key to its tremendous success, but the most important accomplishment of the company is simply that it has learned to learn.

Many people familiar with A3 reports see them primarily as a simple communication tool or problem-solving technique. It's understandable that they focus on this immediate though limited, application. A3s are, indeed, powerful tools that lead to effective countermeasures based on facts. As a result, companies that successfully implement them for decision-making, planning, proposals, and problem solving, can realize instant gains.

The widespread adoption of the A3 process standardizes a methodology for innovating, planning, problem solving, and building foundational structures for sharing a broader and deeper form of thinking. This produces organization learning that is deeply rooted in the work itself – operational learning.

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By John Shook

The A3 Process

The A3 process is based on the scientific method of proposing, implementing and studying changes in a process. This method has been referred to as PDSA (or PDCA), Plan-Do-Study(orCheck)-Act. Some have referred to this as the Deming cycle after W. Edwards Deming, although he credits Walter Shewart with its development. Deming introduced the method to the Japanese in the 1950s. This powerful method is the foundation of A3 thinking and was widely adopted within Toyota.

The PDSA cycle has four stages:
Plan – Determine the problems with current conditions, goals, and the needed changes. This is the hypothesis.
Do – Try out the changes. In other words, experiment or trial.
Study – Analyze the results of the experiments and reflect on the learnings.

Act – Incorporate the new learning or knowledge into the new process and work to standardize the change.

The A3 method assures that the PDSA cycle is followed and the changes are monitored. The process steps can be documented in a variety of formats, but it typically includes the following elements, on a single piece of paper. A3 refers to the standardized paper size of 11" x 17".

1. Title – Names the problem, issue, or topic
2. Owner/Date – Identifies who owns the problem or issue and the date of the latest revision
3. Background – Why is this important? What background information is important? What have we seen in gemba?
4. Current Conditions – Show the current state using pictures, graphs, data, etc. What is the problem?
5. Goals/Targets – What results do you expect? What are the key measures? (quality, cost, morale, delivery, access, etc.)
6. Analysis – What is the root cause(s) of the problem? If you work to eliminate this root cause, will you make progress toward solving the problem?
7. Countermeasures – What proposed actions do you intend to take to reach the target condition? How will you show how your countermeasure will address the root causes of the problem? What is the new standard process?
8. Implementation – What needs to be done? Who will do it? By when? What are the performance indicators to show progress? How will people be trained in the new process?
9. Follow Up – What issues can be anticipated? How will you capture and share learning? How will you continuously improve (PDSA)

Wide adoption of A3 thinking through all levels of the organization will create a community of problems solvers. People will begin to think of every activity as a potential learning activity, rooted in everyday work.