A3s: It's More Than 'Fill in the Boxes'

Dear Drew,

I have had numerous requests over the past year for 'A3 Thinking' workshops. I always welcome opportunities to teach this powerful improvement methodology. In almost all cases the requesting organization had previously attempted to practice the approach, and had encountered some difficulty in doing so. I do believe that only through struggle comes true learning. However, there seems to be much confusion around the use of the tool that is creating some unnecessary frustration and even displeasure with it - thereby 'spoiling the water' you might say. That is <u>not</u> the kind of struggle I am referring to in terms of learning.

One such request began with a discussion on how the organization had two people attend a lean leadership workshop that briefly covered the topic of A3s. Upon returning to the organization and reviewing the workshop content with their peers, it was decided by senior leadership to move forward with the A3 tool. Four subjects were selected by leadership to be the subjects of the A3 'storyboards'. A leader for each was assigned and off they went. After four months of very little progress, the President of the company grew frustrated and reached out for help. I asked him if he thought that people attending a workshop

that included ~2 hours on a subject was sufficient skill development for them to practice that subject. "Not when you put it that way" was his response, adding "I really just thought all they had to do was fill in the boxes on the template that they were using." This was not the first time I have heard such sentiments about A3s, if not in those exact words, then in people's approach to its use.

The A3 methodology is a 'process' based on Deming's "Plan-Do-Check-Act (PDCA)". It takes deliberate practice and repetition with the help of a 'coach' to become proficient. While the titles of the various sections of the A3 template (whatever template you are using) seem straightforward, there is required skill and depth of understanding to effectively practice the A3 process. What is really the purpose of the 'Current Conditions' section? The 'Analysis' section? The 'Goal/Target' section? and so on. The template reflects a process beginning with the <u>objective</u> understanding of 'current conditions' - really to first <u>learn</u>. The fact gathering done at this point of the process will help people to define the problem or performance gap more clearly than before. Analysis of root cause of the problem or performance gap will then follow. Knowing one's destination - the goal or target' - before considering 'countermeasures' and segueing into the 'Do' phase is a critical aspect of the methodology. The 'Follow-up' section represents the 'Check' and 'Act' phases of PDCA. Clear distinction between problem or gap, cause, target or goal, and countermeasure is another key aspect of any improvement methodology. Easy to understand right? Difficult to put into practice.

Now, about that 'template'. I come across organizations that insist that everyone use the same template, and there is <u>no</u> flexibility in its layout. This is often imposed under the guise of 'standardization'. But what if the nature of the 'storyboard' is different? A story about an organization's strategy will certainly be somewhat different than one about a specific quality problem, which will be different from one about a performance

improvement initiative. Sometimes we know what the problem is before we start the process. Sometimes we have a vague idea but nothing concrete. Sometimes we know they goal or target at the outset of the 'story'. Sometimes we don't know until the current conditions are understood. Surely the template we are using must be flexible to handle all of the situations we may encounter. I have seen that attempts to strictly adhere to a single template can create real obstacles to the process. A few tweaks to the template and Presto! the individual or team of individuals are off and running. For example, an effort to improve performance of a process may not have a 'problem' with 'root causes' in the classic sense that a quality issue would. Drop the term 'problem' altogether, and substitute the word 'obstacles' for 'root causes' and the clouds lift from the practitioners minds as they can now see the path forward. It is <u>not</u> about adhering to a standard template but the process and the thinking.

   As with most methodologies and tools it is probably best to start 'small'. It took quite some time before I learned to play complicated songs on the piano as I was learning as a child. Simple pieces came first, followed by more and more complicated ones. In the case of the story previously introduced, three of the four 'subjects' involved BIG improvement efforts affecting multiple locations within this global organization. During a recent A3 workshop at a healthcare organization, six out of nine 'subjects' were very broad in scope. Now, part of the process is to 'narrow' the scope of such undertakings in order to better insure success. Nonetheless the aggressive nature of the efforts for an organization just starting was interesting to me. I made the comment about 'attempting to solve world hunger' several times during the two-day workshop. From my experience, tackling smaller issues allows for more rapid PDCA (and learning) cycles. With enhanced skills comes the ability to take on more and more complicated issues. Much like learning to play the piano.

   Another common point that arose was the 'social' aspect of the

A3 methodology. A3 is a strong social tool when properly practiced. Individuals or teams of individuals 'authoring' A3s need to begin to share their stories from the very beginning. Valuable input and coaching can be provided as a result throughout. I have come across numerous groups struggling with the A3 process. Upon review the topics they were tasked with were not really appropriate for the process. For example, one was a simple change in accounting policy dictated by the CFO. There was no need to gather facts, garner support, analyze root causes, etc. Yet the team was allowed to languish for four months because they did not understand that sharing the A3 with others in the organization, and doing so from the outset in the 'Background' section was part of the A3 process. Much frustration and wasted time would have been avoided if this was understood. In another organization the understanding was that the team could only review their A3s with senior leaders as part of a formal update at designated times. However, A3s progress at different rates. Socializing the A3 at each point of the process (each 'box') at the appropriate time and with people whose input is needed to bring the story to a 'happy ending' is what is really needed. Such sharing needs to happen more fluidly in order to be effective. Further the coaching must always focus on the process and not just the 'content'. Are the authors exhibiting sound critical thinking? Are pre-disposed biases hindering the effort? To that last point those providing coaching must <u>not</u> impose his or her biases on the process as well. I have seen all too often that particular leaders influence the process to meet some predisposed beliefs. This does not typically result in a positive outcome.

   These are just several points that arose within the past year on this important subject. It is hoped that people will consider them when practicing the A3 methodology (and other improvement methodologies). With a deeper understanding of the process and its intent, people can more deliberately and effectively put it into practice. At the very least it is hoped that people will understand that the A3 process is much, much more than 'filling the boxes'.

Best Regards

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