

Managing to Learn: Using the A3 management process to solve problems, gain agreement, mentor, and lead

John Shook

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\$49.00 138 pages plus examples.

Reviewed by Paul Harmon

A3 is an international paper size. A4 is the international equivalent to 8 ½ x11 in the US, and A3 is a double page, roughly equivalent to 16x11. It is also the popular term for the way that Toyota's managers communicate with each other about projects. By extension, it is a popular term among Lean practitioners for a communication process management tool.

The essence of A3 is a large sheet of paper on which a manager describes a problem and proposes a solution. The idea is that the manager in charge of the project summarizes the problem and the solution on a single, large sheet of paper which is then presented to the senior manager for approval. The A3 page (document) is discussed. Often the senior manager suggests ways in which the project manager could improve the project analysis and solution. In such cases the project manager revises the document and resubmits it. Done correctly, the A3 structures the ongoing dialog between the project manager and his or her senior manager. The submission, review and rewrites structure a mentoring process that guides the development of the new project manager. The size of the paper enforces a discipline on the dialog. The problem must be summarized at a very high level.

There is no one, official way to layout the A3 document – although most managers treat the page as if it were two 8 ½ x11 pages, side by side. Figure 1 illustrates an A3 diagram pictured in John Shook's book *Managing to Learn*. This A3 layout follows a very common approach that summarizes a project in the following terms:

Title (Process to be improved.)

1. Background (How big and how important is the problem?)
2. Current Conditions (How much? How many? How long?)
3. Goals/Targets (What would a solution look like?)
4. Analysis
5. Proposed Countermeasures (What should we do?)
6. Plan (How should we go about the solution?)
7. Followup (How should we followup to assure the solution works?)

John Shook's book is organized around a case in which a senior manager works with a new project manager to solve a problem. Their interactions are structured by A3, but the goal of the senior manager is, ultimately, to develop the thinking skills of the new project manager. Along the way, we learn a great deal about the way the skilled senior manager uses the A3.

Having read the book, we know, for example, that it's a foolish junior manager that tries to fill out the complete A3 document after one look at the project. By the second or third iteration our junior manager understands that he had better understand the real root causes of a problem

before he proposes a solution. On the other hand, he is encouraged to submit his A3 on something like a weekly basis so he learns to focus at the outset on a good problem statement and only gradually moves beyond that.

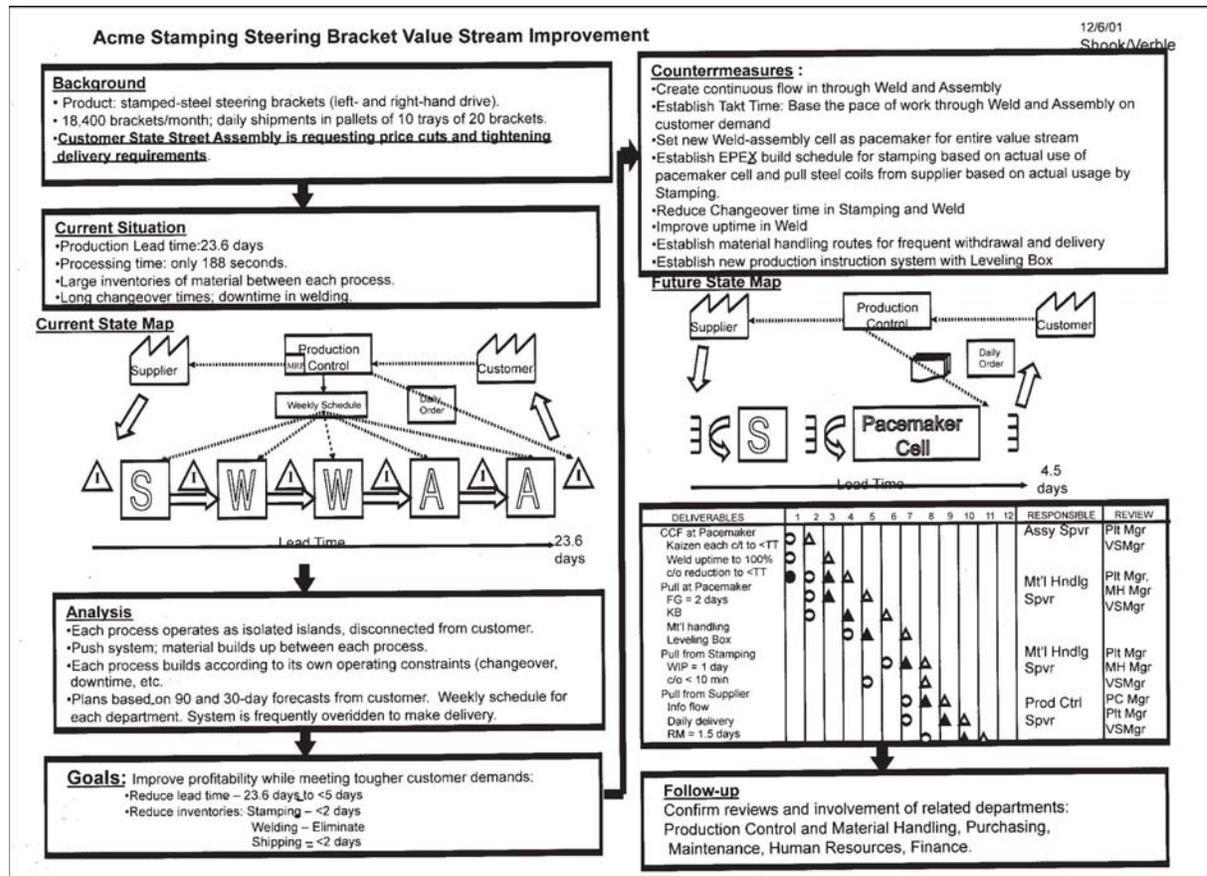


Figure 1. An A3 worksheet from Managing to Learn.

The A3 pictured in Figure 1 is the result of a couple of months of effort. Our junior manager has learned to use a variety of tools, and he has examined the problem many times, interviewing different people and gradually digging deeper and learning more about the problem.

There are different ways one could describe Shook's book, *Managing to Learn*. It's a very good introduction to the use of A3 documents. It's also a good introduction to what's involved in problem solving and process analysis. Further, it provides insight into how a senior manager can work with a junior manager to develop his or her skills – by asking questions and setting challenges, while avoiding simply telling the junior manager what to do. In other words it's a good introduction to the Toyota way of training and managing new managers. And, along the way, it's a gentle introduction to several specific analysis techniques, like cause-effect diagrams, gap analysis and PDCA.

There are a number of 350 page books on each of the topics I just mentioned. Shook manages to provide considerable insight and a good overview of how you do these things, simply and effectively, using an A3 document to structure the discussion. And he does it in a friendly, easy to read 138 pages!

A3 is a powerful idea that is, at the same time, very simple. I'm convinced that any organization that used A3 and took it seriously would significantly improve their process management efforts.

If you don't already know about A3, and about managing and mentoring with A3 diagrams, this is a book you need to read as soon as possible.

Paul Harmon is the executive editor of Business Process Trends website and the author of *Process Change* (2nd Ed).