

# Questions, Questions:

How to Review an A3 Report

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## How to Review an A3 Report

### Key Takeaways



- Traditional corporate culture sanctions behaviors that do not support effective A3 reviews because they lead to defensiveness and rushing to the end of the process.
- A small amount of preparation helps A3 reviewers to ask better questions and then deliver more effective feedback.
- Effective A3 reviewers ask hard questions and tell the writer what he or she needs to hear.

### The Five Big Mistakes We Make When Reviewing A3s

When colleagues invite you to review an A3 report, do you find yourself:

- Coming into the review meeting without having read the report? (If you didn't get it in advance, perhaps you should reschedule the review).
- Telling the person what the solution to their problem should be?
- Giving feedback on areas of the report that fall outside of your expertise?
- Diving into your criticism of the A3 before asking clarifying questions?
- Expecting them to incorporate every piece of your feedback even if it conflicts with others' feedback?



These common behaviors reflect the traditional corporate culture where meetings consist of lengthy slide presentations and everyone just wants to jump ahead to the end. They don't work all that well even in that context, except perhaps to intimidate and befuddle the presenters and to prove that the person giving feedback has superior knowledge or more power. While that might make one person feel good, it doesn't help the organization solve problems or get things done.

These behaviors have no place in a lean organization that strives to incorporate systematic problem-solving into everything that we do. While they may sometimes lead to a faster solution, they don't support the transfer of knowledge from the person who has the ability to see the obvious solution and the person who can't. They shut people down rather than opening up their creativity, and they lead to defensive, overloaded presentations instead of clear, focused problem-solving and decision-making sessions.

An effective A3 review avoids these pitfalls by maintaining dual focus during the review: it is important to give accurate and complete feedback to strengthen the A3, and it is important to show your respect for the writer's efforts and help him or her improve as a lean thinker. We accomplish these goals by asking good questions, listening to the responses and then sharing feedback.

### My Process for Reviewing A3 Reports

Whenever I receive an A3 for review, whether from a client or a colleague, I go through these five steps to ensure that the conversation is constructively focused and beneficial to the A3 report writer, while managing my own time investment. With practice, you can prepare for most management level A3 reviews in about ten minutes.

#### 1. Ensure that I understand the purpose of the A3 report and the feedback I'm expected to give.

Before I can begin to give useful feedback, I need to know why the report was written and what feedback I'm expected to give. Does the writer need a detailed technical review, suggestions for improvements to make it easier to read, or help navigating the politics around a proposal? Is this a Knowledge Brief that requires an in-depth review or is this a Status Report that just needs a quick skim?

I want to make sure that I understand how mature the A3 is at this moment. If it's an early draft, I'll need to ask different questions than I will later, after the writer has built a shared understanding among the reviewers. With proposals, we focus more on problem analysis in the early drafts and then we shift to recommendations, then finally implementation details as the LAMDA cycle moves into ACT. For Knowledge Briefs, early reviews take more time than later ones since there are more potential errors to find.

The Theme Statement and the format of the A3 help provide clues, but if these things are not clear, then I email the writer immediately to get clarification so that we don't waste our time later, rather than make a guess.

## 2. Look for evidence that the person writing the report has used good problem-solving and proposal development practices.

As I read through the report, I look for signs that the person writing the report has used solid logic, good problem-solving skills and effective proposal development. Specifically, I look for:

- Evidence that the person has spent some time gathering observations at the source without presupposing a solution to the problem at hand.
- An understanding of the root causes and the existing body of knowledge that relates to the report's content.
- Effective use of visual and other models to foster rich discussion.
- Effective communication with key stakeholders, including those impacted by any recommendations.
- Effective follow-through and an understanding of what success looks like.
- Effective communication around context to make the knowledge created reusable.

The details don't have to be in the report itself, but if I don't see these things mentioned, I'll probably ask about them.

## 3. See if the visual models and text used on the A3 support the story that the A3 is telling.

All A3s, even status report A3s tell a story. Does one section lead logically to the next section? Does the text effectively explain the visual models? Do the conclusions follow from the evidence? How would I improve the models or the text so that they would be more effective at communicating the author's ideas?

## 4. Develop a list of questions to ask in the review.

I take the notes I've made in the first three steps and I turn them around into questions. For example, if I don't see evidence that the writer has asked Why?, I'll ask, "why do you think this is?" or "what do you think is causing this?"

Takashi Tanaka introduced me long ago to the concept of a "kind question" - a question that elicits a useful, nondefensive response: "Where is the information from the Alpha team?" is a kind question. "How could you leave out the Alpha team?" is an unkind question. Needless to say, all of your questions should be kind questions.

If you are used to telling more than asking, or if your natural tendency is to challenge, it may be helpful to write out your questions in advance until you get more comfortable with this approach. It might be helpful to identify your top three to five questions, but then have a few extra prepared.

## 5. Focus the face-to-face time in the review around the questions and then give any specific recommendations only at the end after I have listened to their responses.


If possible, I give A3 feedback in person, with a web conference as the 2nd alternative. I don't need to spend very much time - we can get a lot done in 5 - 15 minutes. I ask questions, listen to the responses and then ask more questions. Only at the end do I give my specific recommendations, and then only if they still fit. Often, by the time we get to the end, my questions have led the writer to come to the same conclusions on his or her own. Then the writer owns the conclusions, not me and they are more likely to stick. I'll reinforce the important ones by saying something like, "I like your idea about getting input from the test engineers first - it will help to strengthen your recommendations."

## You Don't Have to Be an Old Softie

All this focus on developing the writer's skills and asking kind questions may make it sound like these meetings are touchy-feely "Kumbaya" campfire gatherings. Nothing could be further from the truth.

A good A3 review should always be respectful of the people involved, but it can be as tough as it needs to be in other ways. The best A3 reviews I've seen feel like encounters with your best professors - the ones you learned the most from, even as their tough standards and high demands nearly buried you. People learn the most from tough questions respectfully asked and answered.

If the ideas are half-baked and the writer has no good answers to your questions, it's OK to say, "Your argument is not strong enough. Work on these specific areas and then bring it back to me on Tuesday." Sometimes, we even have to say, "This approach is not working. You need to start over with a fresh look at things."

The writer is likely to come back with something more useful if this message comes after you have demonstrated that you understand the purpose of the report, even if you disagree with it, and that you have taken some time to prepare for the review. The questions you ask show that your feedback comes from a basis of shared understanding, if not shared agreement. 

## Discussion Questions

- How good is your organization at asking questions vs. giving advice or feedback?
- How much lead time do you need to effectively prepare for an A3 report review?
- What are some examples of good, thought-provoking questions that you've heard?

## Next Actions

- Develop a list of basic questions that fit your company's approach to A3 reports.
- Observe how much time you spend asking and listening vs. telling when you review A3s.

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