After Action Review (AAR) Process

Learning From Your Actions Sooner Rather Than Later



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A typical project review is done "post-mortem" – after the fact, and well past any opportunity to change the outcome.

You finish a project, and then you study it to determine what happened. From there, you decide which processes to keep and what you'll do differently next time.

That may help the next project – but it's too late for the project you've just finished: you may have used too much time and too many resources in the project being reviewed, and you could have avoided some of this if you'd done a

review part of the way through.

Wouldn't it be better to evaluate along the way – so that you can capture lessons learned after each milestone, and improve performance immediately?

Organizations of all types, across all industries, could benefit from an ongoing review process. The After Action Review (AAR) process was developed by the military as a way for everyone to learn quickly from soldiers' experiences in the field.

With this system, critical lessons and knowledge are transferred immediately to get the most benefit. The "field unit" has an opportunity to talk about what happened, and other teams can then use this experience right away. In this way, the performance of the whole organization improves in a timely manner.

Benefits of an AAR

AARs provide an opportunity to assess what happened and why. They are learning-focused discussions that are designed to help the team and the organization's leaders discover what to do differently. For example, when conducting organization-wide training, you might complete an AAR after the first training session to analyze what to do better in the next session. Or, if you're changing your

manufacturing process, you could do an AAR after completing the first 100 units, instead of finishing the entire run.

Depending on the nature and size of a project, you may actually do the AAR after completion. The common factor is applying the AAR process to all recurring, or repeating, events and activities, as well as those that pose a challenge. The AAR approach supports a continuous learning culture – and the desire to find and use best practices and innovative approaches.

It's important to note that AARs aren't limited just to large or formal projects. You can use them after staff meetings or regular operational functions, like month-end accounting. Also, when a safety incident occurs, an AAR can reveal important lessons.

An added benefit of the After Action Review process is improved communication and feedback within teams themselves. Because the focus is on learning instead of blaming, the process itself leads to improved understanding of team performance, and helps people think about how best to work together to produce better results.

The AAR process is related to the Deming Cycle, or Plan-Do-Check-Act (PDCA), and it's a great addition to any continuous improvement initiative. The Deming Cycle is a

broader approach to solving problems and managing change. AAR is a useful tool that works with PDCA, but they're not substitutes for one another.

Conducting an After Action Review

An AAR is a structured meeting that does the following:

- Focuses on why things happened.
- Compares intended results with what was actually accomplished.
- Encourages participation.
- Emphasizes trust and the value of feedback.

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For the AAR process to be successful, the team needs to discover for itself the lessons provided by the experience. The more open and honest the discussion, the better. Here are some of the key elements of an effective AAR:

- **Discuss the purpose and rules –** The AAR does not seek to criticize negatively, or find fault. The emphasis

should be on learning, so make this clear right from the start to achieve maximum involvement, openness, and honesty.

- **Encourage active participation –** When setting the rules, talk about trust. Emphasize that it's OK to disagree and that blame isn't part of the discussion. Personal attacks must be stopped immediately. Setting the right tone for an AAR is extremely important.
- **Use a facilitator –** A neutral party helps focus the discussion. This person asks questions and can often lead the discussion in such a way that it remains nonjudgmental.
- **Talk about TEAM performance –** The AAR is not about individual performance. Look at how the team performed, and don't assign blame.
- **Conduct the AAR as soon as possible –** For feedback to be effective, it should be timely. By doing an AAR quickly, you'll get a more accurate description of what happened. It also helps ensure that all (or most) of the team can participate.

- **Focus the discussion with skillful questioning –** If you ask, "How do you think that went?" this can be too broad a topic to discuss. Instead, direct participants to think about specific issues or areas: "How well did you cooperate?" "How could communication have been better?" "What planning activities were most

effective?"

Discussion questions typically center around three themes:

1. What was supposed to happen? What did happen? Why was there a difference?
2. What worked? What didn't work? Why?
3. What would you do differently next time?

Start by getting participants to agree on what was supposed to happen. If the original objectives were unclear, then it's unlikely that the project or activity was very successful. Once you have agreement, you can discuss actual versus intended results. You may need to return to the objectives as you move on to what worked and what you would do differently.

Remember to ask open questions, so that participants don't think that there's a "right" or "wrong" answer:

- What would you have preferred to happen?
- What would you do differently next time?
- How could the situation have been prevented?
- In your opinion, what is the ideal procedure?

Sometimes it's helpful to have participants each write down their ideas, and then ask everyone to share. This helps you avoid groupthink, and it allows quieter

individuals to contribute.

Write the key discussion questions on a whiteboard or flipchart. This helps participants focus on the main purpose of the meeting.

- **Let the team talk –** This is an exercise in good communication, not just feedback and continuous learning. The better the team members communicate with one another and work out differences, the stronger they'll be in the future – as both individuals and team players.
- **Record the recommendations –** Write down the specific recommendations made by the team. Then forward this information to other team leaders and stakeholders. This is how AARs contribute to organization-wide learning and improvement.
- **Provide follow-up and training –** If no one follows up on the recommendations, then time spent on the process is wasted. Create a system to ensure that the ideas gathered in the AAR are incorporated into operations and training activities.

See our articles on running effective meetings and managing conflict in meetings to learn how to do these things effectively.

Key Points

After Action Reviews provide an effective approach for capturing lessons learned from activities and projects.

Rather than waiting until the end of a long project to evaluate how well the team did, AARs incorporate continuous learning right from the start. They're also great for ensuring that the lessons learned from one project or team are shared with the rest of the organization, with a view to improving overall performance.

Continuous improvement helps us handle the changes that are happening around us. AARs help us keep open a steady dialogue about learning and improvement. They also allow organizations to learn and adapt, so that they can keep up with – and stay ahead of – change.