



AFTER-ACTION REVIEW GUIDANCE

ABOUT/GOALS

An After-Action Review (AAR) is an assessment conducted after a project or major activity that allows team members and leaders to discover (learn) what happened and why, reassess direction, and review both successes and challenges. The AAR does not have to be performed at the end of a project or activity; it can be performed after each identifiable event within a project or major activity, thus becoming a live learning process (the learning organization).

The AAR should review the tasks and goals of the activity as they were initially understood. It should also evaluate whether these tasks and goals were effective after implementing the activity. Hence the AAR serves as a tool that can potentially redefine goals or future tasks. The AAR also identifies next steps or action items towards meeting these goals after the activity itself has finished. It is not a critique. In fact, it has several advantages over a critique:

- It does not judge success or failure.
- It attempts to discover why things happened.
- It focuses directly on the tasks and goals that were to be accomplished.
- It encourages team members to surface important lessons in the discussion.
- More team members participate so that more of the project or activity can be recalled and more lessons can be learned, shared, and incorporated back into the project or subsequent projects.

ASSUMPTIONS/REQUIREMENTS

Audience

The audience can be anyone that had a stake in the project or activity. It might be helpful to have both internal (e.g., immediate project team, allowing for a more informal and candid conversation) and external (e.g., clients, subcontractors, government stakeholders, implementing partners, etc.) AARs.

Necessary Resources

- Setting: An open space (e.g., circular table), conducive to learning (not critique)
- Materials: Writing tools (a whiteboard/flip chart and markers, or a computer, projector, and screen)

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- Time: 15 minutes to 2 hours
- A facilitator to shape and direct the discussion and draw out answers from the group (note: the facilitator should have knowledge of the activity, but preferably not be directly involved since s/he should synthesize and guide, but not add to the discussion)
- A notetaker to ensure detailed documentation

How Tos

Facilitation

Beginning—The AAR will seek to answer five key questions: 1) what was supposed to happen, 2) what was the reality, 3) what went well, 4) what did not go well, and 5) what should be changed for next time. Begin an AAR by creating a bulleted list of topics that will be covered. The facilitator should talk with the activity lead and possibly the participants before the AAR to get an idea of these topics, write them on the whiteboard, and then ask the group to take a look and make any additions. Before the discussion starts, the facilitator should make it clear to participants up front that their job will be to keep the discussion on track and on task. They may say at the beginning that they are going to spend a certain amount of time on the first two questions and then move on as the last three questions are the crux of the AAR.

Although the “what to fix” category is more often on peoples’ minds at the outset, it is useful to point out that there are also important things to learn from what went well. It is also helpful to do a hard break after the first two questions, reviewing aloud what is on the board and then asking, “Is there anything to add, on either the ‘intent’ or ‘what actually happened’ charts, before we move on to the next two questions?”

Middle—Once approximately three-quarters of time has elapsed, the facilitator should ask the key stakeholder(s) if there are any additional issues/concerns to have the group address—be specific. This can help to re-direct the focus if it seems like the AAR has gotten off track, or if there is more to be said. If, at any point, the facilitator finds that the focus is getting diluted or diverted (or that any of the initial points are being neglected), they should draw the participants’ attention back to the discussion questions.

End—Reserve the last ten minutes to let each person say one more thing (only). Generally: “We have ten minutes left. That gives us plenty of time to get one last comment from each of you—one minute, max. Take a look at the charts, plus our list of topics on the whiteboard. What one thing would you add, starting with [name someone]? Of course, you should also feel free to ‘pass’. And I’ll give [the owner/sponsor/manager/key stakeholder] the last word.” Then actually call on them, in order going around the table. This keeps control, while giving people the chance to say at least one thing.

Finally, the facilitator and notetaker should review and collate the notes on the discussion. This should be shared with everyone involved so that they can add any additional information. It also serves as a record of the discussion and any resulting key points and action items.

Results and Follow-up

A successful AAR will result in reflection, learning, and recommendations for improvement that are applied to future projects or activities. This systematic process captures good practices and ensures that bad practices are improved upon, thus turning projects and activities into educational experiences for the staff, which promotes continuous improvement of team services and products.

During the AAR, the recommendations for improvement should ideally translate into specific action items with clear roles, responsibilities, and timelines. In creating tasks that operationalize the suggested improvements, the AAR engenders tangible changes rather than just a discussion. The facilitator or activity lead should follow-up on these action items to ensure that changes are made on schedule. Finally, before starting the next phase of a project or activity, those involved can review previous AARs to identify what worked well and what did not work well in the past to support the planning of future projects and activities.

LESSONS LEARNED/BEST PRACTICE/ LIMITATIONS

Success Indicators

- A fruitful discussion that results in reflection, learning, and recommendations for improvement
- The next similar project, activity, or phase integrates and reflects upon what was learned from the AAR
- Feedback and/or survey responses (if applicable) from those involved in the activity is incorporated

RESOURCES

[KM4Dev AAR Toolkit](#)

[Intro to After-Action Review, David Gurteen](#)

[Practical Guide on Knowledge Sharing, "After-Action Reviews and Retrospects"](#)

[USAID After-Action Review: Technical Guidance](#)