

After Action Review

What are after action reviews?

An after action review (AAR) is a discussion of a project or an activity that enables the individuals involved to learn for themselves what happens, why it happened, what went well, what needs improvement and what lessons can be learned from the experience. The spirit of an AAR is one of openness and learning – it is not about problem fixing or allocating blame. Lessons learned are not only tacitly shared on the spot by the individuals involved, but can be explicitly documented and shared with a wider audience.

After action reviews were originally developed and are extensively used by the US Army.

What are the benefits?

What makes after action reviews so powerful is that they can be applied across a wide spectrum of activities, from two individuals conducting a five minute AAR at the end of a short meeting to a day-long AAR held by a project team at the end of a large project. Activities suitable for AARs simply need to have a beginning and an end, an identifiable purpose and some basis on which performance can be assessed. Other than that, there are few limits.

Some examples of when to use an AAR are: when you have introduced a new set of procedures or ways of working; after a busy winter season in which capacity was stretched; following the introduction of a new computer system; after a major training activity; after a shift handover; following a piece of research or a clinical trial; after performing surgery; etc.

AARs are excellent for making tacit knowledge explicit during the life of a project or activity and thus allowing you to capture it. Learning can be captured before a team disbands, or before people forget what happened and move on to something else. Despite the name (“after action”), they do not have to be performed at the end of a project or activity. Rather, they can be performed after each identifiable event within a project or major activity, thus becoming a live learning process in which lessons learned can be immediately applied. In fact this is where AARs can add the greatest value.

AARs provide insights into exactly what contributes to the strengths and weaknesses of a project or activity, including the performance of each individual involved, of the project leader, the team as a whole, and the various processes involved.

AARs are also a useful tool for developing your employees, which they do by providing constructive, directly actionable feedback in a non-threatening way because they are not linked to employee assessment. Similarly, they give people an opportunity to share their views and ideas and to be heard.

How do I go about it?

AARs can be grouped into three types: formal, informal and personal. Although the fundamental approach involved in each is essentially the same, there is some variation in how they are conducted.

Formal AARs tend to be conducted at the end of a major project or event (learning after doing). They require some preparation and planning, but are not difficult as they take the form of a simple meeting.

This meeting may take place over a couple of hours or a couple of days, depending on the scale of the project. Steps and tips for successful formal AARs include:

1. Call the meeting as soon as possible and invite the right people
AARs should be conducted as soon as possible after the event. The reasons are simple: memories are fresh, participants are available and where appropriate, learning can be applied immediately. As well as the project manager and the key members of the project, it may be useful to invite the project client or sponsor and also members of any project teams who are about to embark on a similar project. However, be aware that the presence of external people may inhibit some team members.
2. Create the right climate
The ideal climate for an AAR is one of trust, openness and commitment to learning. AARs are learning events, not critiques, and so should not be treated as performance evaluation. There are no hierarchies in AARs – everyone is regarded as an equal participant and junior members of the team should feel free to comment on the actions of senior members. Make it clear that the purpose of the meeting is to help future projects run more smoothly by identifying the learning points from this project.
3. Appoint a facilitator
Ideally an AAR should be facilitated. (Certainly a formal AAR should be facilitated but informal AARs and personal AARs need not be so). The main purposes of the facilitator are to help the team to learn by drawing out answers, insights and previously unspoken issues; to ensure that everyone has an opportunity to contribute; and to help create the right climate and ensure that blame is not brought in. The facilitator should be someone who was not closely involved in the project, so that s/he can remain objective.
4. Revisit the objectives and deliverables of the project
Ask “what did we set out to do?” and “what did we actually achieve?”. You might like to revisit the original project plan at this stage. You might also decide to construct a flow chart of what happened, identifying tasks, deliverables, and decision points. This can help you to see which parts of the project were particularly effective or ineffective.
5. Ask “what went well?”. Find out why, and share learning advice for the future
It is always a good idea to start with the positive points. Here you are looking to build on best practice as well as learning from mistakes. For each point that is made about what went well, keep asking a “why?” question. This will allow you to get to the root of the reason. Then press participants for specific, repeatable advice that others could apply in similar situations.
6. Ask “what could have gone better?”. Find out what the problems were, and share learning advice for the future
Notice that you are not simply asking “what went wrong?” but rather “what could have gone better?”. This way you can learn not only from mistakes, but also from any aspects of the project that got in the way of delivering even more. Hence the focus is not on failure, but on improvement. Even if no mistakes are made as such there is almost always scope for improvement. Again, for each point that is made, keep asking a “why?” question to get to the root of the reason. Then again, press participants for specific, repeatable advice that others could apply in similar situations: “what would we do differently next time?”.

7. Ensure that everyone feels fully heard before leaving the meeting

It is important that participants do not leave the meeting feeling that they have not been heard or that things have been left unsaid. A useful technique here is to ask them for a numerical rating of the project: “looking back, how satisfied are you with the project: marks out of ten?”. People who have said the project was fine will often still score it an eight, which enables you to then ask “what would have made it a ten for you?”.

8. Recording the AAR

It is important to have a clear and interesting account of the AAR and its learning points, both as a reminder to those involved and in order to effectively share that learning with others. You should aim to include things like: lessons and guidelines for the future; some background information about the project to help put these guidelines into a meaningful context; the names of the people involved for future reference; and any key documents such as project plans or reports. Bear in mind who will be using your account and ask yourself if you were to be the next project leader, “would this account and the lessons in it be of benefit to you?”

9. Sharing the learning

As well as distributing your account of the AAR to the project team, you need to consider who else could benefit from it. For example, you may be aware of another team that is about to embark on a similar project. You also need to make your learning more widely available so that people working on similar projects in the future might also benefit; your document therefore needs to be stored somewhere it can be easily found and accessed by those it could help. This may be in a library, or in some kind of knowledge database or on an intranet.

Informal AARs tend to be conducted after a much smaller event such as a meeting or a presentation (learning after doing), or following a specific event during a wider project or activity (learning while doing). They require much less preparation and planning and can often be done on the spur of the moment, as the format is simple and quick – a “pencil and paper” or flipchart exercise. In an open and honest meeting, usually no longer than half an hour, each participant in the event answers four simple questions:

- What was supposed to happen?
- What actually happened?
- Why were there differences?
- What did we learn?

Personal AARs are a simple matter of personal reflection. For example, take a few minutes to reflect on something you did yesterday such as a patient consultation, dealing with a complaint or making a specific telephone call. Ask yourself the four AAR questions above. What does that tell you about what you could do differently tomorrow?

Are there any other points I should be aware of?

- It is worth repeating that AARs are learning events, not critiques. It is therefore vital that they are not treated as performance evaluation. The quality of an AAR depends on the willingness of participants to be open; this is unlikely to happen if they fear they are going to be assessed or blamed.
- Studies on the learning process show that the less time that elapses between discussing a lesson and applying it at work, the more effective the application. This would suggest that AARs are most valuable when used to “learn while doing”.