

After Action Reviews

The United States Army uses an effective learning tool to improve its performance called After Action Reviews (AAR), which it refers to as “a sophisticated organizational self awareness program for officers and enlisted men.” Essentially, an AAR is self reflection on an event by all those involved to learn what happened. Through the use of the AAR the Army has developed what it calls a “learning culture” in which collaborative inquiry and reflection are made possible.

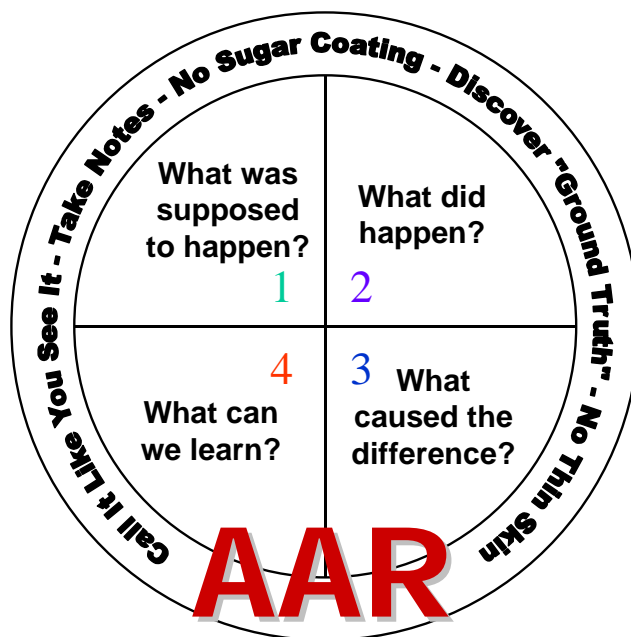
An AAR answers four essential questions:

1. What was supposed to happen?
2. What did happen?
3. What caused the difference?
4. What can we learn from this?

The U.S. Army’s three National Training Centers where the Army conducts its large scale military training uses the AAR extensively. Each and every battle is followed by an AAR. The Training Centers use a variety of means to collect hard, inescapable, verified data to assess performance. The Army refers to these as “ground truths.”

And it uses trained observers to observe and conduct the AARs. These observers are highly skilled facilitators who get the participants to discuss the events – from the lowest level soldier at the front to the highest level officer engaged in the event. Everyone is expected to participate and to discover for themselves what happened, why it happened to improve on weaknesses and sustain strengths. Discussions begin at the platoon level and work their way up the line.

Discussions are characterized as open, honest and candid. People are encouraged to identify mistakes they made as well as mistakes that were made by others. “Thin



skins” are not permitted. And any other use of the candid discussions that take place are strictly prohibited – in fact, using input from an AAR for any other purpose, including performance evaluations, is a career ending event. The focus is on what can be learned, not who can be blamed. The Army does, however, expect people to learn from the mistakes and not make the same mistake twice. Learning is expected.

The Army has five basic guidelines that govern AARs:

1. no sugar coating
2. discover “ground truth”
3. no thin skins
4. take notes
5. call it like you see it.

How many organizations do you know that could or would follow those five basic guidelines? The Army credits its success in Afghanistan to what it learned from the Kuwait effort in 1991. And the recent success in Iraq is also due to what was learned in 1991 as well as Afghanistan.

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This learning model has been so successful that it has been adopted by large corporations, such as Wal-Mart, BP, and Bechtel, with some modifications. It is important to understand the AARs can work at any scale – it doesn't require a major mock battle! BP uses the AAR to learn before, during and after an event. Bechtel calls its efforts "Lessons Learned." Sam Walton says Wal-Mart's success was because "we learned faster from failure than the other guy."

Note that AARs as used by the Army and these organizations are different from "de-briefings." In a de-briefing, the focus is on the person being de-briefed – he or she is expected to change. For example, after many training events, there is an evaluation of the instructor. The instructor is expected to change. In an AAR, the participants are expected to change their behaviors. Note also that AARs are future oriented – not retrospectives. Focus has to be on learning that will impact the future. Blame games don't work in that environment.

AARs don't require any sophisticated technology. They don't have to follow only on major projects or events. They can be both formal and informal. The Army uses both models. At the lower levels, the AARs are often informal, and as they move up the chain of command they become more formal. The important thing is that AARs must become a way of life – in which members of the organization are always asking "what can I learn from this?" AARs have become second nature in the Army now.

Some ground rules:

- Do not try to judge success or failure.
- Learn WHY things happened.

- Focus on the tasks and goals that were supposed to happen.
- Encourage people to surface important issues and lessons
- Have as many people as possible participate.
- Do them every chance you get and keep them simple.

The AARs offer some rules for learning in any environment:

- The best learning comes from the most stressful situations.
- Learn about what matters.
- Use hard data "ground truth" to eliminate subjective debate.
- Use facilitators who coach and don't lecture.
- Teach the team to each itself.

Effective use of AARs should create a mindset in the organizations that goes beyond the event itself. They should create an environment where the people in the organization are never satisfied with the status quo and where candid, honest and open discussion can and will occur which promotes learning as a way of life in the organization. This kind of learning is everyone's business and everyone is responsible for collecting the hard data that can be used to analyze results.

Resources:

Dance of Change, Senge et. al.

The Wealth of Knowledge, Thomas Stewart
Harvard Management Update, March 2002.

It Paid Off in Afghanistan: Eight Lessons from the Military That You Can Use.

Surfing the Edge of Chaos, Pascale, Millemann, Goija

Reflections: The Society for Learning and Change, Winter 2001 issue

Common Knowledge, Nancy Dixon