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After action review

After action review

What is it?

First used by the US army on combat missions, the after action review is a structured approach for reflecting on the work of a group and identifying strengths, weaknesses and areas for improvement. It is routinely used by project teams in corporations such as General Electric, British Petroleum and Motorola. An after action review (AAR) conducted after Hurricane Katrina led to new systems for communications during natural disasters. One team member reported, "Without an AAR you keep learning your lessons again the hard way!"

An after action review method of evaluation usually takes the form of a facilitated discussion following an event or activity. It enables understanding of the expectations and perspectives of all those involved and it captures learning, which can then be shared more widely.

When to use it

AARs can be used after any activity or event that has been particularly successful or unsuccessful. It is also often used at the end of a project to help populate a **lessons learnt** log. It is important to disseminate learning widely so that good practice can be shared and others can learn from mistakes.

How to use it

Try to include as many people as possible who were involved in the activity or event so that a wide range of viewpoints can be explored. A prerequisite of an AAR is that everyone feels able to contribute without fear of blame or retribution. AARs are about learning, not holding people to account.

It is useful to involve an experienced independent facilitator who can guide the group through the discussion and help create a safe and open atmosphere.

The discussions tend to last a maximum of one hour. The facilitator will guide the group through a series of questions:

- What happened that we want to learn from?

Creating a common understanding of the experience under review:
- What did we set out to do?
- What actually happened?
- Why were there differences?
- What went well? Why?

Reflecting on the successes and failures:
- What could have gone better? Why?

Identifying specific recommendations:

- What would you do differently next time?

What next?

Agree as a group on any actions that need to be taken, including how you are going to share the learning more widely. The AAR can be used to help populate a **lessons learnt** log.