

AFTER-ACTION REVIEWS

What is an After-Action Review (AAR)?

An AAR is a structured meeting or conversation designed to carefully review and evaluate a particular activity- such as a piece of work or an event that has taken place. The reflections drawn out are then used to consider how best to plan future activities. In this way, AARs enable us to learn from successes and avoid repeating mistakes.

When and how would you carry out an AAR?

It is best to carry out an AAR shortly after the activity has taken place so that the details are still 'fresh in the mind'. An 'everyday' AAR should take 30-40 minutes to complete, however more time may be needed for larger activities/events.

It is important to involve a sufficient number and range of people in the AAR process; selecting views from a number of perspectives, not just from those involved in the initial planning stage. It is also important to nominate a facilitator and a scribe for the AAR to ensure it runs effectively and that valuable information is recorded successfully.

Where appropriate and possible, it is also good to include customer feedback in the AAR. External comments can then contribute to your own reflections and can prevent the AAR from being biased.

Finally, it is good to set out ground rules at the start of the AAR. For example: all views are valid and of value and the AAR is a learning activity, not a blaming activity.

What sorts of things do AARs consider?

A popular format for AARs is one based on five main discussion points:

- What were the planned objectives and outcomes of the activity?
- What actually happened?
- Were there differences between the planned activity and what actually happened? (what worked well, what didn't work as well?)
- What have you learnt from this?
- What action needs to be taken to ensure this learning is applied to future planning of activities?

These questions clearly define the key things to consider and prompt us to apply our findings to future planning. Although you should balance time across the five questions, it can be beneficial to focus more on questions four and five as they often extract the most valuable information.

What to do after the AAR has been completed?

Once the AAR has been completed, it is important to swiftly write-up and distribute the information to the group – clearly identifying immediate action points. Storing the document in a central location then ensures it is easily accessible for use in future planning activities.

AFTER ACTION REVIEW: CHECKLIST FOR FACILITATOR

Question 1: A brief explanation/description of the activity being reviewed

- Complete this section prior to the session and summarise to the attendees at the start of the AAR to focus attention

Question 2: What were the planned objectives and outcomes of the activity?

- This covers the area/subject/project/activity for review. Clarity about the purpose of the AAR will help keep conversations on track
- If you are concerned that conversations may go off-track, then having a 'parking-lot' flipchart is a good idea. These wider points can then be recognised (not dismissed) and captured for future use
- A facilitator may open the AAR by referring to any pre agreed agenda, project objectives or actions plan against which to pose the question 'what was supposed to happen?' The assumption being that these things were meant to happen
- A facilitator may ask the project/team lead to start by answering the question – in a scene setting way
- A facilitator may ask attendees to spend a couple of quiet moments thinking for themselves 'what was supposed to happen?' and then write this down. After a couple of minutes the facilitator could invite answers from that already written. This is a good approach if you wish to avoid attendees being constrained by agendas, project objectives or action plans (see above)
- A facilitator may wish to get the conversation flowing by asking for contributions based on attendees birthday months, i.e. those born in January answer first. This approach avoids round room 'creeping death', eerie periods of silence and any organisational hierarchy from those attending

Question 3: What actually happened?

- This question seeks out feedback and recollection of what actually happened and what it was like. Often, things do not pan out as originally envisaged, particularly in complex organisations
- Attendees may have different views and experiences about what actually happened. It is important to give air-time to each view/experience and try and record these in a factual/evidential way
- If feedback is more about learning and differences, then the facilitator should capture this briefly, acknowledge that the point will be covered later, and then return to the 'what actually happened question
- Practice and experience will assist a facilitator in knowing when to keep asking the question in hand and when to move on the next

Question 4: Were there differences between the planned activity and what actually happened?

- This question seeks out the differences/variances between what was supposed to happen and what actually happened
- Prompts might include: was this difference true for others? What were the experiences of others? Were the differences significant? Why was there a difference?

Question 5: What have you learnt from this?

- Answers to this question get to the heart of an AAR. A facilitator could pose the question in a dramatic/meaningful way (to highlight its importance and the changing emphasis of the AAR) and should have the confidence to leave the question in the air and not worry about any period of silence that might ensue
- If there is a period of silence, then a facilitator should pose the questions again – and ask, quizzically “so what did we learn?”
- A facilitator may take the approach that learning is best thought of individually before sharing and repeat the exercise described in Q1 above, i.e. ask attendees to take a few moments to think about team/project and personal learning and then write this down
- A facilitator may choose to cluster the responses as provided, i.e. “the learning thus far appears to be in these 3 or 4 categories – what do you think?”

Question 6: What action needs to be taken to ensure this learning is applied to future planning of activities?

- Answers to this question should focus on the actions to take (as a team/project or as individuals) including those for consideration, specific actions and priorities
- A facilitator can use this question to sum up/conclude the AAR
- A facilitator may wish to remind attendees of their answers (an overview/story) to questions 1 to 4 before asking them to answer question 5 – a sort of reminder prior to seeking further feedback
- Clarity upfront about the “we” can be helpful, i.e. are the actions for a project, a manager, an individual?

And finally - An AAR should end with a “thank you for attending” and agreement about the documented outputs, e.g. how widely should they be shared? Is there anything which is confidential? Any learning about the AAR process, questions, and approach gained by the facilitator should be shared with other facilitators and/or added to the knowledge transfer tool-kit.

AFTER-ACTION REVIEW TEMPLATE

Activity:

Date of activity:

Date of AAR:

Attendees:

1	Detail of the activity being reviewed	
2	What were the planned objectives and outcomes of the activity?	

3	What actually happened?	
4	Were there differences between the planned activity and what actually happened?	
5	What have you learnt from this?	

6	What action needs to be taken to ensure this learning is applied to future planning of activities?	
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Any Additional Comments