

# AFTER ACTION REVIEW

/ Continuous improvement of ongoing projects or initiatives /

## WHAT IS AN AFTER ACTION REVIEW?

The After Action Review (AAR) is a quick reflective exercise for team-based learning during a project or ongoing initiative, in order to improve results in the current project. The AAR facilitates team learning from experience; it does not require outside experts. AARs can be very powerful tools for change, especially if they are repeated at major project milestones.

### REQUIREMENTS:

- *Facilitator (can also be a participant)*
- *Rapporteur*
- *Flipchart*
- *2 - 15 participants*
- *45 - 90 minutes*



## WHEN AND WHY TO USE

The AAR is best used:

- ▲ **To improve practice in the context of a specific project.** Apply AAR to identify problems and find solutions, to surface issues that might otherwise remain hidden, and to draw out learning for improving results, especially in activities that will be repeated.

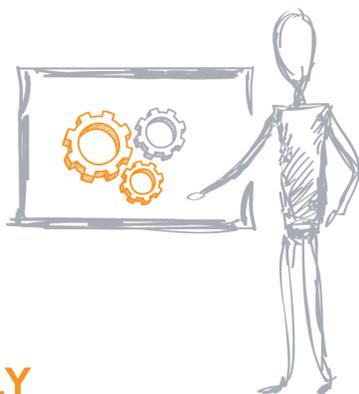
Improved results come from corrections and improvements in the methods being used, from better coordination among the persons working on the project, and from improved ability to respond to change during the project.

- ▲ **To develop capacity within your team.** Repeated use of AARs during a project can improve communication, clarify team roles and objectives, build confidence among team members in their joint capacity to overcome challenges, and can also accelerate the building of individual capacities and competencies by team members..
- ▲ **To reflect on significant project moments.** Use the AAR upon completion of significant tasks or project phases, when the team is still available and the memory of past actions is

fresh, and when challenges, opportunities and new approaches have occurred during the project.

The application of AAR, over time, leads to new or revised knowledge, new and more effective ways of working together, and eventually to mastery within the context of the project. The AAR is for continuously improving and strengthening capacity for action, not for assessment or reporting. Actions from the AAR should be taken forward by the participants.

The AAR is a process for quick, action-oriented learning and improvement during an ongoing project. For more in-depth learning at the end of a project, use the Retrospect method described elsewhere in this Toolbox.



## HOW TO APPLY

### Prepare in advance

#### 1. Plan for AARs and integrate them into your project work schedule and routine.

Before you start a long-term project, set aside a small amount of time periodically to do an AAR. For example you could do them at the same time as any other regularly scheduled reviews. For shorter-term projects, workshops, activities or events, schedule the AAR right after the activity has been completed.

### When you are ready to start

#### 2. Convene the group, and assign a facilitator and rapporteur. Pose the following four questions to the whole group. For each question, collect answers, get opinions from all participants, and note any trends that emerge. Then proceed to the next question.

**Question 1: What was supposed to happen (in the project or activity under review)?** The answer(s) should be a brief recap of the objectives or intended results. This step is often crucial in gauging if all persons involved understood the action(s) to be taken.

**Question 2: What actually happened?** Obtain the answer through personal accounts of the participants. Ask participants always to refer to facts that support their conclusions about what happened.

**Question 3: Why was there a difference (between the plan and the actual result)?** Discuss and agree on the reasons for the differences. Identify the factors that contributed to success or lack thereof.

**Question 4: What will we do next time (the same, and differently)?** You are looking for specific ideas for action that can be implemented by your team.

#### 3. Create a brief action plan, or simply assign responsibilities for relevant actions, in order to maintain the successes and improve on the shortcomings.

## TIPS FOR SUCCESS



### Planning

▲ Plan for AARs during the planning stage of the project/ initiative: Assign dates and let the team know about what is expected.

▲ AARs should be carried out soon after important milestones or turning points, while the team is still available and memories are fresh.

▲ Avoid using AAR for evaluating performance (e.g. PER) or for assigning credit or blame; to do so will likely kill the process.

▲ Try to involve all of the persons who play key roles in implementation; if a key person is omitted, then future action may not benefit from the reflection that the AAR facilitates, and needed change may not take root.

▲ AARs involving large groups or sensitive topics may work better with an impartial external facilitator, but most sessions can be facilitated by a member of the group.

▲ A 'champion' who knows the value of

AARs in practice can be very valuable for instituting and sustaining their regular use, but if no champion is available, don't let that stop you. Get started and use them.

### Running the AAR

▲ Because the AAR is a group learning process, minimizing the impact of hierarchy is essential. Try to seat people in a circle, and encourage participation by emphasizing the value of everyone's contribution. Consider using index cards to collect the answers from participants, in order to further reduce the impact of hierarchy.

▲ During the discussion, focus on issues and learnings that are relevant to future activity. Reflecting and learning from past actions must be accompanied by planning and decision-making on what you will do, or do differently, in future. Make the recommendations both actionable and as specific as possible.

▲ Don't over-analyse and get bogged down with unnecessary detail; discuss only the most important factors and move along.

▲ Openness and honesty are key to making this work. Done well, it can help to build trust and minimise fear of admitting mistakes. The focus should be on learning.

▲ All the rules of good facilitation apply, including respecting and listening to one another, leaving aside preconceptions, exploring disagreement rather than shutting it off, keeping

the meeting focused on the process, and balancing participation among group members.

▲ The learning from an AAR can be captured in a brief (e.g. 1 page) action plan. If you choose to do so, then keep the writing simple; the real output of an AAR is the shared learning and understanding, and the writing is simply an adjunct. In the action plan, maintain confidentiality and do not attribute any comments to specific individuals; this will help maximize openness and trust among participants. Disseminate the action plan to relevant team members as needed.

### Follow-up

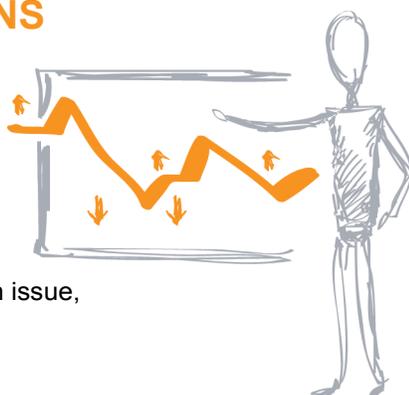
▲ Be aware that iteration is often necessary in order to put learning into practice. This means that a series of small, light AARs will yield more benefit than one lengthy session.

▲ Don't judge the value of the AAR method with just a single trial. Although it is a simple technique, it can take time for a team to find its rhythm with the AAR. At least 3-5 iterations of the AAR within a project are suggested as a good starting point. Through repeated use of the AAR, team members will learn how to bring important issues to the group, how to identify key learnings, how to filter out non-essentials and how to apply learnings to change practice.

## VARIATIONS

### ▲ 2-5-1 Storytelling:

For use in situations where reticence or unfamiliarity is an issue,



try 2-5-1 Storytelling<sup>1</sup>. The numbers refer to specific points that each participant should make, and the 5 in particular refers to the 5 fingers. The first 2 points can be dropped in situations where all team members know each other well.

<b>2</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Who I am</li> <li>2. Summary of my experience</li> </ol>
<b>5</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Little finger: Aspects of the project receiving insufficient attention</li> <li>2. Ring finger: Relationships, including new relationships that others should be informed of, relationships needing improvement or relationships that need to be created</li> <li>3. Middle finger: Things that have frustrated me or that have obstructed success</li> <li>4. Index finger: What I want to tell others, such as partners, senior managers, etc., about how things could be improved</li> <li>5. Thumb: Things that have gone well</li> </ol>
<b>1</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The most important point or idea for future action</li> </ol>

▲ **Cascading AARs:** For a large project with many participants, or with geographically separated teams, you can implement cascading AARs. First carry out an AAR in each of several smaller teams. Then get a representative from each team to meet and do a second level AAR in order to combine the results of the initial set of AARs; this completes one cascaded AAR. Repeat as necessary. Carrying out cascading AARs is more time-intensive, but can help synthesize project learning across several widely separated groups, and can keep the number of participants in

<sup>1</sup> Created and described by Karuna Ramanathan and written up by Robert Swanwick; see references list.

each session manageable. (Note: For the second level AAR, ensure the representatives have decision-making authority so that discussions lead to future improvement.)

**If you use cascading AARs, then ensure that each group uses the same methods for recording the discussions** (e.g. a flipchart, computer-based note-taking, group members writing on cards, etc.) This will greatly facilitate aggregating and/or comparing the outputs of the various groups.

#### ▲ **AAR in a hurry (with only 3 questions):**

If you are pressed for time, you can try a version of the AAR with only three questions. This is best suited for teams already familiar with the AAR approach; it does give up some of the analytical power that comes with the more structured 4-question approach described above, in favour of a faster process. The three questions are:

1. What worked well, and why?
2. What did not work well?
3. What can be improved, and how?

Then create a **brief** action plan, or simply assign responsibilities for relevant actions.



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