After Action Reviews and Retrospects

WHAT IS AN AAR?

Organizational learning requires a continuous assessment of organizational performance, looking at successes and failures. This ensures that learning takes place and supports continuous improvement. The After Action Review (AAR) is a simple tool that facilitates this assessment.

It works by bringing together a team to discuss a task, event, activity or project, in an open and honest way.

THE PROCESS

There are many different ways to conduct AARs.
The whole process should be kept as simple and as easy to remember as possible. The essence of an AAR is to bring together the relevant group to think about a project, activity, event or task, and reflect on the following simple questions:

- What was supposed to happen?
- What actually happened?
- Why were there differences?
- What worked?
- What didn't?
- Why?
- What would you do differently next time?

A **Retrospect** has a similar format to an After Action Review, but asks the following more detailed questions:

- What was the objective of the project?
- What did we achieve?
- What were the successes? Why? How can we repeat the success?
- What was disappointing? Why? How can we avoid them in future?
- 'Marks out of 100', what would move it closer to 100?

BENEFITS

The After Action Review is a powerful tool because it produces quick results in a short time and can be applied to a broad range of activities.

Its strengths are the following:

- it allows team members to immediately apply lessons learned;
- it gathers the group's intuitions about the strengths and weaknesses of an activity or a project;
- it gives team members an opportunity to share their views and ideas and thus develop a common perspective on which they can base their future work.

KEY POINTS AND PRACTICAL TIPS

✔ Post the questions on flipchart sheets prior to the session. Write answers on the sheet as the session progresses.

✔ The facilitator should prepare some lead-in questions and may have to directly solicit answers.

✔ If there are issues with either openness or time, it may be worthwhile to gather individual ideas first and then facilitate a group discussion.

✔ An uninvolved note-taker should be asked to take minutes for the session. This will make sure lessons learned are captured.

✔ Actionable recommendations should be as specific as possible. For example, an AAR could have the following recommendation: 'Make contact with the organizing body representative and ask about the range of participants before planning the workshop.'

✔ Participants of an AAR should include all members of the team.

✔ AARs should be carried out immediately, while the team is still available and memories are fresh.

FIND OUT MORE

– RAPID Toolkit - Tools for Knowledge and Learning: A guide for development and humanitarian organisations, Ben Ramalingam, July 2006
  www.odi.org.uk/Rapid/Publications/Documents/KM_toolkit_web.pdf

– EC-FAO Food Security Information for Action Programme e-learning course: Collaboration and Advocacy Techniques   www.foodsec.org/DL

– USAID After-Action Review Technical Guidance, February 2006   http://pdf.dec.org/pdf_docs/PNADF360.pdf

– Knowledge Sharing Toolkit. An Evolving Collection of Practical Knowledge Sharing Techniques   www.gesci.org/files/Knowledge%20Sharing%20Toolkit.pdf

– The Gurteen Knowledge Website - Introduction to After Action Reviews, January 2000   www.gurteen.com/gurteen/gurteen.nsf/id/X00006DDE/

– Collison C. and Parcell G., 2001, Learning to Fly: Practical Knowledge Management From Leading and Learning Organizations, Oxford: Capstone. 2004. ISBN: 1841125091 2nd Edition

– Whiffen, P. (2001) 'Seizing Learning Opportunities at Tearfund', Knowledge Management Review, Nov/Dec.

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