

How to do After Action Reviews

An After Action Review (AAR)¹ is a simple knowledge management technique conducted via dynamic, structured discussion among team members, experiences and activities are analyzed based on expectation and outcomes achieved: **What happened and why? What worked well? What needs improvement?** and **What are the lessons and recommendations?**

An AAR requires little time for participants (about 2 hours) to capture what they know based on the reconstruction of the facts, enhance their understanding of possible causes for the success or failure of their project or activities, make headway in a critical interpretation of what occurred, formulate recommendations, and refine their work hypotheses.

What are the benefits?

AARs help project teams:

- Discover and understand possible causes of mistakes, as well as unforeseen successes;
- Encourage discussion, ongoing learning, and open dialogue among members regarding strengths to be maintained and weakness to overcome;
- Enhance understanding of circumstances that impact team performance and how to work better in the future to achieve objectives;
- Correct course and adjust activities while the project is still ongoing;
- Identify lessons from projects and activities that can be shared with the rest of the organization, in particular colleagues who might embark on similar initiatives in the future;
- Increase technical and institutional confidence by providing members with the opportunity to share lessons and be heard in a receptive atmosphere, independent of an individual or team performance assessment;
- In short, increase the likelihood of success and development effectiveness.

When and by whom are AAR conducted?

It is recommended that the project team carries out an AAR after any important stage or activity of a project; during or after its execution. Ideally, the project team would ask a knowledge management colleague who is not directly involved in the project him/herself to facilitate this exercise.

Before an AAR:

It is recommended that the team do the following:

- Define in clear terms what is to be learned during the AAR and for what purpose
- Conduct the AAR as soon as possible after the project milestone or stage to be reviewed
- Include relevant individuals
- Select a facilitator (ideally a KM colleague who is not part of the team him/herself)
- Select a rapporteur

¹ Extracted from: IDB, Inter-american Development Bank, 2009. Guidelines for conducting After Action Reviews. Available at: <http://idbdocs.iadb.org/wsdocs/getdocument.aspx?docnum=36075549>

For questions and support on how to apply this tool, contact knowledge@undp.org

- Prepare materials and agenda

During an AAR

These are the recommended steps for conducting an AAR:

- a. Introduction (5% of the AAR duration): Remind participants of the ground rules, clarify the AAR's objectives, present the meeting agenda and methodology. 5 mins
- b. Reviewing project or activity objectives (15% of the AAR duration): What was expected to happen?, what were the expected objectives and deliverables?. 15 mins
- c. Defining what actually happened and what objectives and outcomes were achieved in practice (25% of AAR): identifying critical moments, creating a timeline. 20 mins
- d. Comparing the plan with actual results, identifying any gaps and their causes, and making recommendations (50% of the AAR duration): Analyzing the timeline, formulating review questions (What worked well and why?, What could have worked better?, What could we do differently the next time?), and identifying specific recommendations for action (lessons). 45 mins
- e. Bringing the AAR to a close and drawing conclusions (5% of the AAR duration) 5 mins
- f. Documenting the AAR and its conclusions (throughout AAR)

AAR report and follow-up

An AAR report includes the following sections:

- The target audiences
- Background information regarding the project activity analyzed
- Name of the individuals responsible for the project and participants in the AAR
- Deliverables
- Timeline with critical moments
- Analysis of critical moments, lessons and recommendations stemming from this analysis
- Dissemination plan for the AAR report. Besides sharing with project teams, it may also be placed in the project space in Teamworks where it serves as a learning resource for others who may be facing a similar phase, challenge or situation.

Other factors for conducting impactful AARs

An AAR is often undertaken following a difficult phase of a project, and in order to be valuable, the team conducting the AAR should keep the following factors in mind:

- Ensure that all relevant team members are included, and not just the most senior or outspoken team members.
- Ensure that all team members have equal opportunity to contribute. Often the most valuable information is gleaned from the least outspoken members of the team.
- Create a comfortable environment in which all present feel confident about contributing to this team exercise.
- Consider the need to include the input of team members who cannot be present, and if necessary, permit them to give their input remotely or in written form.
- Conduct the AAR as soon as possible following the conclusion of the project phase so that memories remain fresh.

DATE:

TEMPLATE: AFTER ACTION REVIEW MINUTES

1. Project/Event Reviewed:

2. Date of After Action Review meeting:

3. When review was completed:

- During Project/Initiative
- After Project/Initiative Completion

5. This review covered the following areas:

4. Meeting participants:

NAME	ROLE
1.	
2.	
3.	
4.	
5.	
6.	
7.	
8.	
9.	
10.	

5. Purpose of the After Action Review (AAR) and intended output:

The AAR is a team learning exercise by and for the team intended to identify lessons learned to inform and improve the effectiveness of future similar projects/initiatives. The AAR is not an evaluation.

6. Brief project summary:

7. AAR meeting minutes:

- a. What did we intend (or plan) to do? What were the team's objectives and each member's role?
- b. What actually happened? Were the initial objectives met?
- c. What went well, and why?
- d. What can be improved (and why/what would we change)?
- e. Recommendations for future similar projects/initiatives.