After Action Review (AAR)

See also Revisión después de la Acción

**Brief Description:**

An After Action Review (AAR) is a simple process used by a team to capture the lessons learned from past successes and failures, with the goal of improving future performance. It is an opportunity for a team to reflect on a project, activity, event or task so that they can do better the next time. It can also be employed in the course of a project to learn while doing. AARs should be carried out with an open spirit and no intent to blame.

AAR is a form of group reflection; participants review what was intended, what actually happened, why it happened and what was learned. One member of the group facilitates, capturing results on a flip chart or in a document.

AARs can be short, frequent group process checks, or more extended, in-depth explorations. They can be conducted in person, on the telephone or even online, either asynchronously (meaning you don't have to be online at the same time with email or web forums) or synchronously (meaning you are online or on the phone at the same time, using tools like chat or instant messaging – IM).

**History**

**When to use:**

- During and after a project to reveal what has been learned, reassess direction, and review both successes and challenges.
- During and after an event monitor and evaluate.

**How to Use:**

Learning While Doing – Time to Reflect (From Chris Collison's *Learning to Fly*)

1. Hold the AAR immediately. AAR’s are carried out immediately whilst all of the participants are still
available, and their memories are fresh. Learning can then be applied right away, even on the next day.

2. Create the right climate. The ideal climate for an AAR to be successful is one of openness and commitment to learning. Everyone should participate in an atmosphere free from the concept of seniority or rank. AARs are learning events rather than critiques. They certainly should not be treated as personal performance evaluation.

3. Appoint a facilitator. The facilitator of an AAR is not there to ‘have’ answers, but to help the team to ‘learn’ answers. People must be drawn out, both for their own learning and the group’s learning.

4. Ask ‘what was supposed to happen?’ The facilitator should start by dividing the event into discrete activities, each of which had (or should have had) an identifiable objective and plan of action. The discussion begins with the first activity: ‘What was supposed to happen?’

5. Ask ‘what actually happened?’ This means the team must understand and agree facts about what happened. Remember, though, that the aim is to identify a problem not a culprit.

6. Now compare the plan with reality. The real learning begins as the team of teams compares the plan to what actually happened in reality and determines ‘Why were there differences?’ and ‘What did we learn?’ Identify and discuss successes and shortfalls. Put in place action plans to sustain the successes and to improve upon the shortfalls.

7. Record the key points. Recording the key elements of an AAR clarifies what happened and compares it to what was supposed to happen. It facilitates sharing of learning experiences within the team and provides the basis for a broader learning programme in the organisation.

**Tips and Lessons Learnt:**

Sign in and click the Edit button in the upper right-hand corner to share a story about how you used AAR - include both successes and failures. Let's learn together!

- **Example: Joint AAR by CARE and WVI, with OXFAM GB and CRS, April 2005.**
  This workshop was a consolidation of a number of country-level learning activities following the crisis caused by the tsunami of 26 December 2004. The AAR focused mainly on the four most affected countries: Indonesia, India, Sri Lanka and Thailand, with additional participation by staff from CARE Somalia. The primary purpose was to explore ways in which participant organisations could jointly improve their performance and quality of work by reflecting back on their activities and actions. It presented an opportunity for participants from various organisations to discover for themselves what happened and why, and how to build on strengths and improve on areas of weakness, as well as exploring ways in which they might collaborate more effectively together. During the workshop, participants discussed best practices and lessons learned in country groups and then discussed these across three themes: accountability, capacity and coordination. Of the best practices discussed over the two days, five were selected as having been most crucial to improving response time and effectiveness:
  - Having existing capacity to respond;
  - Making linkages at community level with local structures and community leaders;
  - Having consistent leadership in the development of strategic plans;
  - The existence of a longer-term planning and fundraising strategy; and
  - The use of humanitarian standards such as Sphere.
The top lessons learned from an interagency perspective included:
• The need for early social/economic analysis which would aid programming and programme monitoring, for joint rapid assessments;
• A central role for community consultation and participation; and
• The importance of preparedness planning, notably the need to build local capacity for emergency response.

Time was then spent action planning on how to work collaboratively on the first three of the lessons learned. Participants returned to their countries with plans for how to take forward the lessons from the workshop collaboratively. Reflecting on the workshop, participants said that as the starting point for a longer process of collaboration, it had been very useful. Participants generally felt that it had helped in reinforcing closer working relationships between NGOs; many suggested that the process should be opened up to wider representation, not only from different organisations, but also from outside. It was also anticipated that the outputs of the workshop would be a valuable input into the planned multi-agency evaluation and other emerging projects and working groups.

This example is drawn from:

Examples & Stories
(add yours)

(from the Knowledge Sharing Project Toolbox

• Sharing Knowledge on Wheat Improvement at CIMMYT

(from the SDC Dare to Share KM Toolkit):

1) Manuel Flury, Head Knowledge Management Service, SDC:

"After the Dare to Share Fair 2004, the organisers reviewed what happened and what the out-come was. We did this by using the checklist "how to organise an international conference" and collected experiences, new ideas and proposals for future conferences of that type. In doing this we exchanged our impressions about what happened, what went well, what could have gone better and shared the lessons to be learnt in the future. At the end and with the help of the "checklist", a case of the Dare to Share Fair was well de-scribed for future organisers. My lesson: Do not just list "lessons" but choose a format that could serve others in a similar situation best."

2) Peter Tschumi, Head E&I Division, SDC:

"During my time as a coordinator of the SDC programme in Bolivia, the core team (sec-tion head, coordinator, desk officer) used an about two hours AAR for a review of the Country Assistance Strategy that was worked out with all key staff some days ago. The AAR produced a list of features to repeat and some proposals what to change in a forthcoming process. The working process of the annual programme of the E&I division including the two hours presentation of the annual programme to interested (internal and external) par-ties was reviewed with a 30 minutes AAR in a section meeting some 10 days later. This
AAR has been a good experience and helps to foster ownership by all concerned."

Who can tell me more?

- Jamie Watts, BIOVERSITY (j.watts@cgiar.org)
- Nathan Russell, CGIAR Secretariat (nrussell@worldbank.org)
- Simone Staiger, CIAT (s.staiger@cgiar.org)
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Related Methods / Tools / Practices

- Peer Assists
- Most Significant Change
- A lovely version of AAR for the more "reluctant"

Resources:

- http://km4dev.org/index.php/articles/329 (includes examples for documenting AARs)
- http://www.gurteens/gurteen/gurteen.nsf/id/X00006DDE/ (includes some useful tips)
- Practical guide for knowledge sharing on "After Action Reviews and Retrospects"

Tags:
evaluation, methods, monitoring, reflection, synthesis