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As the dust settles

Conducting meaningful After-Action Reviews for constant improvement


Cooper

By Miles B. Cooper

The lawyer listened. The situation had gone off the wire. Not fatal. Also not good. How had it happened? Ultimately the lawyer owned it. And within leader ownership, it was important to determine what led to the issue. Process failure, delegation failure, communication failure? All of these? None? Time to dig in, grab those involved, and conduct an After-Action Review.

After the action comes the After-Action…

What's an After-Action Review? Also known as an AAR, it is a technique the military developed for improvement. The team reviews the intended outcome and actual outcome of an action or exercise following an engagement. If you like *Kaizen*, the Japanese continuous improvement business philosophy, you'll love AARs, for they provide structure and follow-through to keep that continuous improvement flywheel spinning.

When should one consider conducting an AAR? After any significant event. Absolutely after any error. Examples where we use them? After a verdict, a case conclusion, our holiday party, and after any mistake. The uses are myriad. They should be held as soon as possible after the event while memories are still fresh. If for any reason it may not proceed right away, event participants are asked to write down their initial responses to the five AAR questions and set them aside for use at the later review session.

The five questions? (1) What was the objective? (2) What actually happened? (3) Why was there a difference? (4) What have we learned? (5) What will we do about it? Everyone involved participates, although there's an asterisk here as far as leadership is concerned. The goal is for open, honest, vulnerable communication. Leadership participation, depending on the leader's personality profile, can sometimes have the potential to stifle openness. An example? Steve Jobs was asked to not participate in Pixar's Brain Trust sessions, an AAR variant, in part because his personality tended to dominate conversation.

During the AAR, all views have equal value. Mechanically, it can be easiest to have a default setting that the most senior team member run the review, and that senior member purposefully hold back comment until the end. Some people are more participatory, others more withdrawn in group settings. The individual running the review should draw out feedback from everyone, including the quieter folks. It can be helpful to remind folks about first principles thinking. This is the concept that nothing is sacred, to take things down to the roots, to the seeds, to draw out the best improvements. Within this conversation includes what worked and what should remain in place.

The individual running the session has the authority to assign a participant a note-taking role. The notes include the answers to the five questions, as well as actionable steps following the AAR. These are often process changes. To encourage open feedback, the notes should not include quotes or attribution unless the individual making the statement is okay with it. Don't presume solos or small firms are exempt. An AAR can be performed by a one-person team. It simply requires one to be even more open, even more vulnerable. It can be challenging to be a fair witness to oneself. We can be harshly critical, or not critical enough. One technique here is to become the observer, imagining you are two or three feet above yourself and watching the internal conversation unfold.

After the After-Action

After-Actions can be quick, simple, affairs. They may not need detailed notes, formal reports, or post-review to-dos. The more significant the event, however, the more likely one will want a writing to make continuous improvements. Here, the assigned note-taker takes on the job of writing up an AAR report. A standard template includes the date, answers to the five questions, and specific to-dos at the end, with clear direction on the individual responsible for acting on each to-do, with a due date. The draft report gets circulated among the team with a 48-hour deadline for any feedback or corrections, and then becomes the final AAR report.

With the AAR report complete, the senior team member makes sure the to-dos are calendared. Case management software or project management software can be leveraged here. Don't want to get fancy? Drop it onto whatever old-school Outlook-style tool floats your boat. Even a paper calendar will do (if you can make room between the typewriter and Dictaphone). Execute the to-dos, improve the processes, course-correct from future errors, and iterate into continuous improvement.

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Back to our lawyer, listening. "I understand," the lawyer said, "Let's grab the rest of the team if we can right now. This is not a drop everything, yet if we can pull folks together, we can get to the bottom of it." In part because the individual bringing the situation to the lawyer's attention was quite junior, and in part because it was true, the lawyer added, "And I expect we'll find I played a significant part in why this derailed." Top-down vulnerability was the best way to step toward this review.

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