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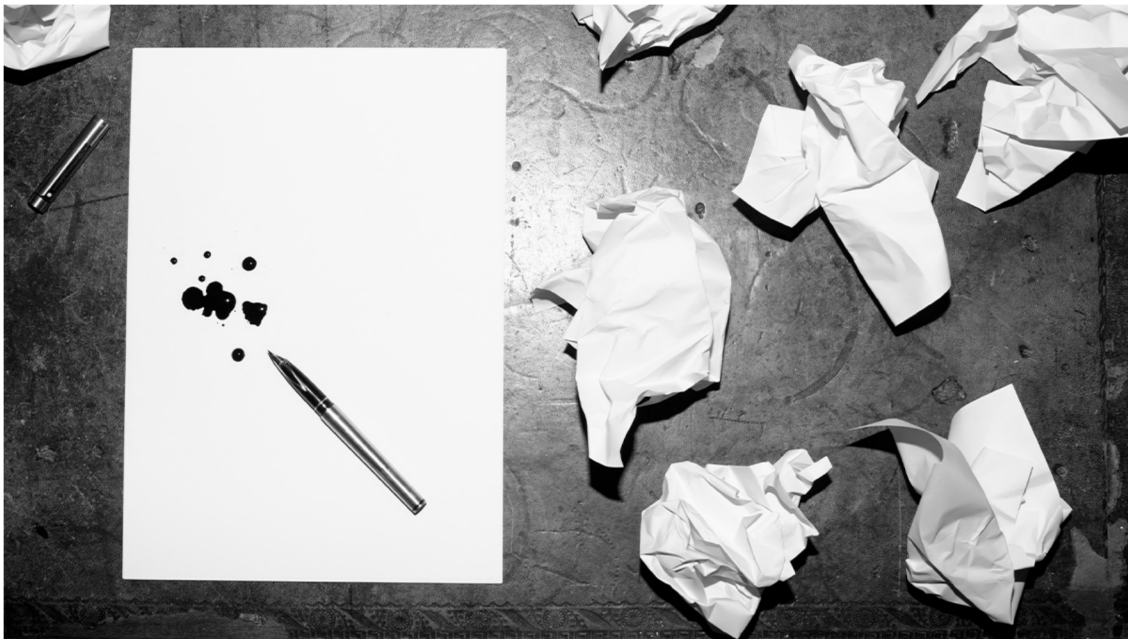
A Better Approach to After-Action Reviews

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January 12, 2023

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Summary. In the decades since the Army created the After Action Review (AAR), businesses have embraced the practice as a way of learning from both failure and success. But all too often the practice gets reduced to nothing more than a pro forma exercise. The authors of this... **more**

How do you fix a failing operation? How do you repeat unanticipated success? How do you ensure that catastrophe never happens again? Every organization has to ask questions like these.

In the 1970s, the U.S. Army developed an answer: the After Action Review, or AAR. In the decades that followed, businesses embraced the practice, which attracted considerable attention after the publication of this seminal HBR article in 2005. Today, it's practiced routinely by major corporations, among them Microsoft and Boeing, and it's become a common response to crisis in many other organizations.

The AAR has achieved this popularity because it can be incredibly effective. It can stop profits from nosediving. It can accelerate growth. It can prevent tragedies from reoccurring.

But the truth is, most AARs are ineffective. Instead of producing a deep and honest analysis of error and oversight, they are reduced to a pro forma exercise. Leaders use them to duck accountability and cover up mistakes. Inconvenient opinions are ignored or silenced. Hard conversations and painful reflection are avoided. Superficial changes are grandly announced, and the organization pats itself on the back and rolls on.

None of this is new. As Peter Senge observed 30 years ago: "The Army's After Action Review (AAR) is arguably one of the most successful organizational learning methods yet devised. Yet, most every corporate effort to graft this truly innovative practice into their culture has failed because, again and again, people reduce the living practice of AAR's to a sterile technique."

We have spent the past two years working with teams at U.S. Army Special Operations to study the brain science of resilience and creative problem-solving and to develop new techniques for processing trauma and growing psychologically from setback. Collectively, we have more than 60 years of experience studying and facilitating AARs for teams all over the world where the consequence of failure is catastrophic. Through thousands of AARs, many for critical incidents, we have witnessed what works and what hasn't — and we've lived through the aftermath of both.

To tackle the problem of underperforming AARs, we launched a collaboration with partners at the U.S. Army. We worked with elite, top-tier Army Special Mission Units and devised a simple set of changes to the original AAR. We tested those changes hundreds of times outside the Army, in organizations ranging from the FBI to Gap. The changes, we found, dramatically improved the AAR's effectiveness, leading to significant performance increases: In an extended trial, conducted across a large crisis-response organization over a two-year period, post-AAR productivity increased by more than 150%.

Here we'll share what we've learned, first by covering the history of the AAR, then by debunking three myths about it, and finally by providing three recommendations for improvement.

The Original AAR

The AAR was developed by the Army as a replacement for what was known as the performance critique: a lecture, delivered by a commander after the completion of a project or task, that identified errors and ordered changes. Its purpose was to boost performance, but instead it often generated estrangement, anger, and division.

To remedy these issues, the AAR was designed with two crucial features:

First, the AAR was participatory. Instead of being a top-down reprimand, it was an open conversation among team members. The goal was to surface every perspective — to harvest all existing insights and to ensure that the entire team felt included, eliminating disaffection and promoting unity.

Second, the AAR was narrative. Instead of listing directives, it delved into the history of the event. This narrative approach allowed for more specific analysis. Rather than abstracting failures and successes into universal principles, it connected precise circumstances and behaviors to precise results. And

because the human brain learns more from narrative examples than from general doctrines, this approach was also more effective at producing organizational change.

To formalize these two new features, the AAR was constructed in four parts, each centered on a different question: 1) What did we expect to happen? 2) What actually happened? 3) Why was there a difference between what we expected and what actually happened? 4) What can we change next time?

Roughly 25% of the time was allotted to Parts 1 and 2, with the remaining 75% allotted to Parts 3 and 4. To encourage full participation, a neutral third-party facilitator was used.

3 Myths About AARs

The AAR is dramatically better than earlier methods of performance review. But three myths about AARs impede their proper use:

Myth 1: AARs are optional. Not all organizations run formal AARs. But every member of every organization runs them informally. That's because after every perceived setback and failure, the human brain automatically runs a process known as counterfactual thinking. It identifies the gulf between expectations and reality, and it imagines: What if I'd acted differently?

In practice, this means that everyone on your team will arrive at conclusions about what went wrong and what can be improved. The question for you is: Do you want these AARs to happen privately, in break rooms and coffee shops, segregating insights and fracturing your team? Or do you want them to occur collectively, so that everyone can benefit from the complete story — and so your team can develop a unified sense of purpose?

Myth 2: The purpose of AARs is to generate a list of lessons learned. Lists look great on the wall. But an AAR's goal is to produce changes in team behavior. Those changes require attitudinal shifts, positive emotions, and specific action items. All three are generated in the brain by narrative — that is, by the specific stories that people tell themselves about what happened and why. The real purpose of an AAR is therefore to generate a collective story that everyone owns as their story, turning the wheels of their future performance.

Myth 3: AAR participants can agree to disagree. For an AAR to work, everyone must converge on the same narrative. Dissent cannot be siloed. Differences cannot be papered over. Consensus cannot be imposed by leadership. Everyone's full experience of the event must be aired. Hard conversations must be had.

It's not always possible to surface the truth after the fact. But an organization shouldn't allow its members to develop their own atomized opinions about what worked and what didn't. The organization must explicitly own ambiguity, and actively resolve it through future operations.

Three Improvements

With those myths debunked, here are three ways you can improve your next AAR.

1. Influence a community, not a process.

Traditional AARs focus heavily on process. And for good reason: Process is impersonal. It allows participants to identify mistakes without pointing fingers, limiting the blame-spreading and defensiveness that inhibit organizational learning.

Change, however, requires personal commitment, which is reduced by an overemphasis on process. Process is abstract and detached. It engages the brain's cognitive hubs but neglects the emotion centers critical for driving action.

To keep AARs from turning into pro forma exercises, make your focus the team, the customers, and other members of a community. Identify their motives for wanting change. Uncover the stories of how the event affected them personally. Prioritize the discovery and sharing of those personal stories.

2. Spend 75% of your time on Part 2.

This change is simple — and revolutionary. In a traditional AAR, participants move quickly through Part 2 ("What actually happened?") in order to focus on Parts 3 and 4 ("What went wrong?" and "What can we do better?"). In our updated AAR, almost all the available time is devoted to Part 2. That allows every part of the event to be parsed from the perspective of everyone involved. This radical shift of time-allotment ensures that all existing knowledge about the event is surfaced. It guards against leaping to conclusions or silencing diverse perspectives. And it acknowledges that the collective perception of an event can help individuals reflect productively on their own memories.

This shift can seem to shortchange the latter parts of the AAR, but in fact it strengthens them. It allows action items to emerge organically from a dissection of what actually occurred, yielding a short list of incisive and motivated improvements that are empirically sourced and have the full team's emotional buy-in.

3. Tell the whole story.

Traditional AARs seek to promote inclusiveness and candor by strenuously avoiding blame. This is well intentioned. But it frequently leads to a counterproductive dynamic: Some individuals evade accountability for their behaviors while others play the martyr and assume responsibility for outcomes that were not their fault.

In the hundreds of AARs that we have run, this dynamic has been the single greatest source of failure. But the remedy is simple. Whenever an individual claims responsibility for a specific

outcome, or an individual points to bad luck or some other external factor as the sole cause of an event, engage every other person who was physically present to share their version of what happened. In short: Reconstruct the whole narrative of the event, slowly and completely, as everyone remembers it. This will excavate the deeper causes of good results and bad.

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The changes we've laid out above improve AARs by extending the shift toward narrative participation. We have seen them deployed to heal mission-critical teams that have suffered catastrophic failures, including fatalities, and to strengthen large organizations that have endured both major setbacks and unanticipated successes. The changes work, and they will work for you. In the aftermath of any project or event, stories will get told about what happened, so the real question to ask as you conduct your next AAR is this: Will those stories strengthen or diminish your organization?

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