

AAR GUIDE

HOW TO RUN AN EFFECTIVE AFTER-ACTION REVIEW OR DEBRIEF



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WHAT IS AN AAR?

Continuous improvement requires that teams regularly assess their performance to gain critical insights from past, present, and future successes and failures. The After Action Review (AAR) tool helps organizations debrief projects, programs, and events. Sharing the AAR results allows future teams to learn from past successes and strategies and avoid future mistakes.

The AAR is a tool that elite special operations units and pilots use to document or reinforce their successes and learn from their mistakes and victories. During the AAR, they discuss what happened, what went well, what did not go well, and what could be improved.

The AAR is a structured approach that reflects on projects, programs, and events to help identify strengths, weaknesses, and areas for improvement.

An AAR/Debrief Sample Format or Agenda:

Use the 5-Question Methodology:

- What were we trying to accomplish? The objective?
- What went well and where could we improve?
- What were the root causes of your success or failures? Ask the 5 WHYS.
- What should we stop doing? Start doing? Or continue doing?
- What lessons learned or pieces of advice would you share with future teams? Provide detailed recommendations.



AAR TOOL USAGE: WHO, WHEN, WHAT

Who should use this AAR tool?

AARs are used by teams who want to maximize key takeaways, whether from a one-time event or long-term initiatives. Despite outcomes, there are always vital takeaways, lessons to be learned, and successes to document. It is extremely important that the entire team attend the AAR to ensure all team members are a part of the process and that their voices are heard.

When should the AAR tool be used?

Teams should use the AAR tool shortly after completing a project, program, or event. You can use this tool regularly (daily, weekly, monthly, etc.) to build a learning culture. In some cases, groups may utilize the same approach with less structure or formality midway through an initiative to ensure the team is on track and things are trending positively.

What time and resources are needed to use this tool?

The total time required to complete an AAR varies depending on the initiative. Formal AARs are ideally conducted with a facilitator and can run 30-minutes to 2 hours. Informal AARs can be facilitated by a team lead and be very brief and to the point. For example, a 15-minute conversation might identify barriers and strategies to overcome them.



An hourglass with dark sand, set against a warm, golden background. The sand is flowing from the top bulb to the bottom bulb.

TIME & SUPPLIES

How much time should you plan for an AAR?

AARs can run from 30-minutes to 2 hours. The time you allot for your AAR will depend on the critical nature of the event or project and the resources available to your team (including the availability of team members).

Should we have an outside facilitator?

Bringing in a third-party facilitator or someone at your company not involved in the project or program is highly recommended. An outside facilitator will have an objective view of the conversation and can encourage all team members to participate.

- When a team member serves as a facilitator, it is essential to ensure that they participate in the discussion as both facilitator and team member.

Supplies

- Flip chart or whiteboard and markers
- AAR Report Template

Meeting roles

- **Notetaker:** Assign a team member to take notes on the flip charts or whiteboard. If the AAR is an hour or longer, consider having team members rotate this job so everyone can participate fully. Notes may also be taken in digital format for easier transcription and reporting.
- **Timekeeper:** Assign a timekeeper in advance. It is easy for groups to get lost in conversation and not have time to review all the sections. It is the timekeeper's role to ensure this doesn't happen and that all areas are covered during the AAR.

PLANNING & ORGANIZING AFTER ACTION REVIEWS

An AAR should be scheduled within two weeks of the initiative's completion, and the facilitator or team leader is responsible for sending out calendar invites to the entire team to ensure full participation. If using a facilitator unfamiliar with the work, they should meet with the team leader before the session to ensure alignment.

The task of the facilitator is to guide the group through a review of the project or initiative, using a standard set of questions:

- What were we trying to accomplish? The objective?
- What went well and where could we improve?
- What were the root causes of your success or failures? Ask the 5 WHYS.
- What should we stop doing? Start doing? Or continue doing?
- What lesson learned or piece of advice would you share with future teams? Provide detailed recommendations.

Start by stating the purpose and context of the meeting:

- The purpose is to improve future outcomes and increase efficiencies throughout the organization
- There are always areas of improvement and ways to capitalize on strengths
- Create an environment of openness and candor
- The AAR is not meant to grade success or failure

An example of AAR ground rules:

- Everyone must take an active role in participating in the process
- All views are of equal value
- No right or wrong answers
- Keep an open and creative mind
- Identify opportunities and areas of improvement while providing solutions
- Do not assign blame; participants should share honest feedback about what actually happened

THE AAR DISCUSSION

Be prepared for uncomfortable moments while guiding the AAR discussion. You can ask questions and let the conversation develop, or you can help the team identify and prioritize their top key issues while continuing to guide the conversation.

Ask, “What were we trying to accomplish?”

Some helpful questions include:

- What was the purpose of the initiative?
- Who were the key players?
- What were the intended deliverables?



Ask, “What actually occurred?”

Team members must focus on what happened without trying to label events or issues as good or bad. However, everyone in the group must be encouraged to voice their perspectives of what transpired without fear of reprisal.

Facilitator Tips

- Provide instructions prior to the AAR so that all participants come well-prepared to discuss their insights and perspectives.
- To get maximum participation from the group, try going around the room to give everyone a chance to speak.
- Ask participants to be specific in their statements and avoid generalizations.
- Summarize or repeat back to the group often.
- Focus on the facts. Feelings need to be acknowledged, but future recommendations have to be based on agreed facts.



Ask, “What went well and where could we improve?”

Start on a positive note. For example, ask, "What went well during the initiative?" or "What positive steps helped the team achieve their objective?" Then, document best practices and identify and implement strategies to ensure future teams have a better path forward.

Facilitator Tips

- Cover both the good and the bad. Try not to pass judgment - it will stifle participation. Let everyone be heard and move on to the next participant or topic.
- If you are running short on time, ask, "what were the top three most important factors that contributed to the initiative's success?"





Ask, “What were the root causes of your success or failures?”

Identify the stumbling blocks and pitfalls, so they can be avoided in the future. The following prompts may be useful:

- What could we have done better?
- What will we do differently in the future to ensure success?
- What would your advice be to future project teams based on your experience?

Facilitator Tips

When trying to identify a problem or something that didn't go well, you should continually ask “why?” until the root cause or problem is identified.

- It is important that discussions of stumbling blocks not become finger-pointing exercises.
- Letting people have their say is okay, but if required or time is a factor, you can redirect the conversation by asking, “so what would you do differently next time?”

Ask, “What should we Stop doing? Start doing? Or Continue doing?”

The goal is for the group to identify actions, behaviors, systems, and processes that need to stop, start, or continue in order to create a common framework, language, and approach for enhancing performance, trust, accountability, and results. Actionable insights should be categorized based on the level of impact and ease/complexity of execution.

Facilitator Tips

- Assign a notetaker and spokesperson and write your agreed-upon ideas and action items
- 10-minute individual exercise
- 20-minute group collaboration and documenting notes - BE SPECIFIC AND ACTIONABLE
- 10-minutes of sharing

Ask, “What lessons learned or piece of advice would you share with future teams?” Provide detailed recommendations.

All AARs should include a final report that is shared with the AAR participants and saved in a lessons-learned database. When similar projects, missions, or action items arise, teams can review the database to gain valuable insights to help save time, money, resources, etc.



ENDING THE AAR

The AAR should close on a positive note; core elements must be identified and summarized during the discussion, providing clear recommendations and actionable items for future improvements. Additionally, team members must understand how lessons learned are gathered, disseminated, and stored for easy reference.

Assign roles and responsibilities

The facilitator or team leader should assign individuals specific roles and responsibilities, including who will document lessons learned and who is responsible for finalizing and disseminating the report.

SHARING AAR DETAILS

The most significant impact of the AAR process comes from sharing and applying lessons learned to future team initiatives. The AAR Report Template is a great way to summarize the key points from an AAR. It also provides a clear summary of tangible and actionable items and outlines tasks and topics that need leadership attention.

We recommend having a cloud-based repository for saving these reports and lessons learned. These repositories can be set up for ease of content search and made accessible to all appropriate parties.



AAR FACILITATOR TEMPLATE

Preparation (What needs to be done prior to an AAR)

- Understand what successful debriefing looks like
- Decide who needs to be invited to the AAR
- Schedule an in-person meeting and send calendar invites
- Provide attendees with what to expect and any pre-work requirements
- Outline your AAR agenda and talking points
- Define the expected results

Facilitation

- Provide an overview and purpose of the meeting
- Introduce the facilitator and their role
- Share the AAR agenda and desired outcome of the AAR
- Assign a notetaker
- Assign a timekeeper
- Explain where AAR notes will be saved
- Let everyone know how and when the notes will be disseminated to the group and outline accountabilities (who is responsible for what after the AAR concludes)

Sample AAR Questions

- What were we trying to accomplish? The objective?
- What went well, and where could we improve?
- What were the root causes of your success or failures?
Ask the 5 WHYS.
- What should we stop doing? Start doing? Or continue doing?
- What lesson learned or piece of advice would you share with future teams? Provide detailed recommendations.

AAR TEMPLATE

Meeting Date:

Meeting Time:

Meeting Location:

AAR Leader:

AAR Attendees:

WHAT WERE WE TRYING TO ACCOMPLISH? THE OBJECTIVE?

WHAT WENT WELL AND WHERE CAN WE IMPROVE?

WHAT WERE THE ROOT CAUSES OF SUCCESSES OR FAILURES? ASK THE 5 WHYS

SUCCESSES

AREAS OF IMPROVEMENT

AS A TEAM, WHAT SHOULD WE START, STOP, OR CONTINUE DOING?

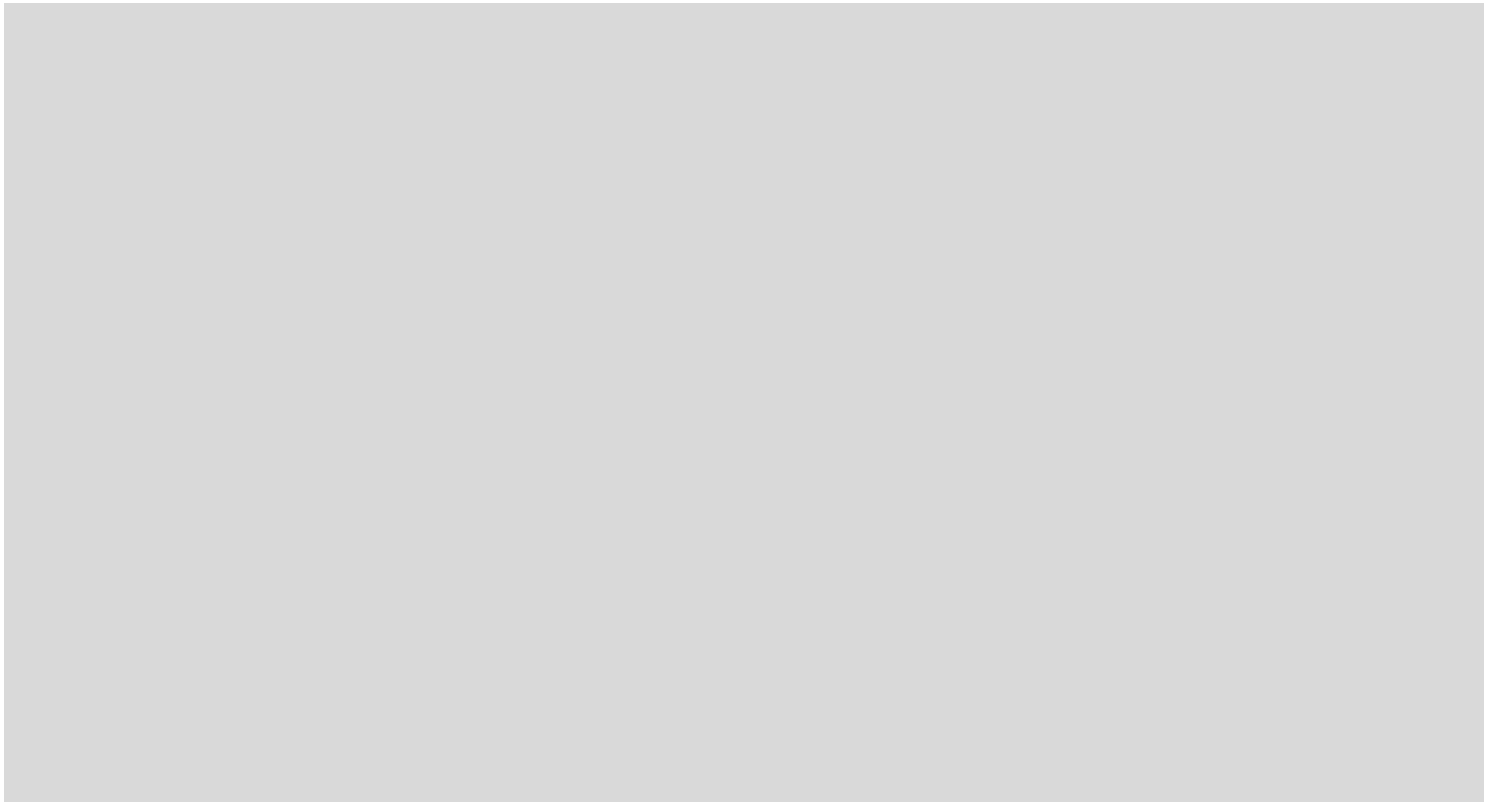
SPECIFIC ACTION TO BE TAKEN
1.
2.
3.

RESPONSIBLE

DUE DATE

AAR TEMPLATE

WHAT LESSONS LEARNED CAN YOU PROVIDE FUTURE TEAMS?



Who is responsible for finalizing the AAR Report? _____

Date AAR Report will be sent to the participant list: _____

List all individuals that should receive the AAR Report:

Where will the AAR Report be stored for future reference? _____

SHARE YOUR AAR REPORT WITHIN 3 DAYS OF YOUR MEETING

ALWAYS END ON A POSITIVE NOTE!