Vice Presidency for Sectors and Knowledge

May 2009

Knowledge and Learning Sector

Guidelines for Conducting After Action Reviews

Introduction

Various methodologies exist for facilitating systematic, collective reflexions of teams (workgroups) and for the identification of lessons learned. These methodologies include after action reviews (AARs), case studies, and observatories (observations?) of experiences.[1] This document presents guidelines for preparing, conducting, and documenting AARs.

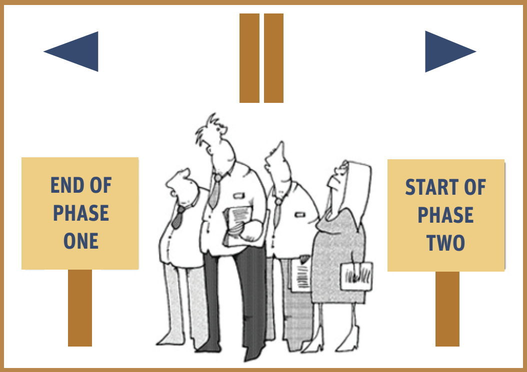
What is an After Action Review (AAR)?

An AAR is a simple knowledge management technique initially developed by the U.S. Army as a learning tool to identify and share critical lessons from training exercises. Public- and private-sector organizations have embraced this technique and adapted it as a method for learning on the job. The advantage of this technique is that it requires little time for participants to capture what they know based on a reconstruction of the facts, enhance their understanding of possible causes for the success or failure of their projects or activities, make headway in a critical interpretation of what occurred, formulate recommendations, and refine their work hypotheses. AARs can readily be adapted and replicated and compliment conventional monitoring and evaluation systems.

An AAR is conducted via dynamic, structured discussion among team members, including partners and clients where appropriate. During this discussion, experiences and activities are analyzed based on expectations and outcomes achieved: ***What happened and why? What worked well? What needs improvement?*** and ***What are the lessons and recommendations?***

It is important to bear in mind, however, that AARs are just one of many review techniques and are not applicable to all contexts and situations. AARs are an effective

Figure 1: AARs are an opportunity to pause and reflect on what has happened so far



Source: Improvement and Development Agency for local government (IDeA) – After Action Reviews *http://www.idea.gov.uk*

[1] See: Inter-American Development Bank, Knowledge and Learning Sector (KNL). 2008. Notas de Lecciones Aprendidas [*Notes on Lessons Learned*].

Contacts in the Knowledge Management Division (KNL/KNM)

Elba Luna
elbalu@iadb.org

Lorena Rodríguez
lorenar@iadb.org

Lina Salazar
linas@iadb.org

method when the goal is to improve methodologies and processes, which constitute tactical and operational dimensions, as AARs are better at answering questions about the how and why.

The lessons that emerge during the discussion are documented for purposes of sharing with other teams and/or organizations. As such, AAR outcomes can contribute to enhancing other projects.

What are the benefits?

AARs allow for an effective and quick understanding of what went right and what went wrong, and can be applied to different kinds of tasks, activities, and projects. In short, AARs help 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 weaknesses to be overcome;
- Enhance understanding of circumstances that impact team performance and how to work better in the future to achieve objectives;
- Identify lessons from projects and activities that can be shared with the rest of the organization;
- 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 are AARs conducted?

Despite its name, an AAR does not have to be conducted at the end of a project or activity. It is recommended that it be carried out after any important stage or activity of a project. Thus, the AAR becomes a tool for "learning by doing" and reviewing along the way.

Some examples of when to conduct an AAR include: when drafting a report on the project's progress or outcomes; after introducing a change in a process; when reaching a milestone; before disbanding the team; when an unforeseen event occurs; when the final report is being prepared at the end of the project; etc. In other words, AARs are useful for taking stock of achievements, innovations, and difficulties in a project or activity at different points **during** or **after** its execution.

AARs should focus on projects or activities that are essential to the department or institution where the review has the potential to contribute useful knowledge, applicable to thematic areas or critical processes for meeting objectives and having a greater impact.

What types of AARs are there?

There are two types of AARs: formal and informal. Formal AARs require some degree of preparation and can take longer, depending on the scale of the project or activity to be analyzed. Informal AARs are conducted following a milestone or event of a smaller scale which involves less time, such as a meeting, negotiations within a project, etc. This type requires less preparation and less time (see box on Chainsaw AAR).

The guidelines proposed here refer to formal AARs, but may also be helpful in preparing informal AARs.

Preparation: before an AAR

To take full advantage of an AAR and the time its participants invest, it is recommended that the team, and particularly the review leader or organizers, do the following:

- **Define in clear terms what is to be learned during the AAR and for what purpose**: the team needs to begin with an agreement about the purpose of reviewing a specific project or activity, which stage or stages will be the subject of review (the timeframe), and the audience to whom the conclusions and recommendation will be directed.
- **Conduct the AAR as soon as possible after the project milestone or stage to be reviewed**: participants' memories are still fresh, it is more likely that participants are available and that the lessons identified will be more relevant and applicable.
- **Include relevant individuals**: in addition to the project or activity team, it may be useful to invite project clients or partners. It should be kept in mind, however, that outsiders may hinder some members' participation. In order to facilitate active participation by everyone, the recommended number of participants is between 5 and 8. For larger teams, several sessions may be organized.
- **Select a facilitator**: ideally, the facilitator will be someone outside of the project or activity. His or her goal is to focus the discussion by asking questions that promote reflextion and create an atmosphere appropriate for dialogue (see page 7 – "AAR facilitation").
- **Select a rapporteur**: AARs enable the identification of lessons and recommendations, but need to be documented to allow for dissemination. Documentation also makes it possible to strengthen institutional memory and create a record that can subsequently be analyzed to identify best practices. The role of the rapporteur is therefore essential to an AAR's success and usefulness.
- **Prepare materials and an agenda**: reserve the conference room and secure necessary materials (digital recorder, computer, flipchart, cards, wide tip markers, paper, and pencils).

Implementation: during an AAR

Steps for conducting an AAR are presented below with recommendations regarding the time to be spent on each. On average, a two-hour AAR can effectively cover the steps suggested below, depending on facilitation and the team's use of time. More complex projects and activities may require more time or several sessions.

A. Introduction (approximately 5% of the AAR's total duration)

The facilitator (and participants) should encourage a frank and open atmosphere from the start, emphasizing that the AAR is a learning event and not an evaluation. As part of the introduction it is also important for the facilitator to:

- **Remind participants of the ground rules**: emphasize that ideas compete on a level playing field and that their value does not depend on the participants' rank.
- **Clarify the AAR's objectives**: through a brief summary of the project or activity, mention the purpose, the timeframe covered, how and with whom conclusions will be shared, and their expected use.
- **Present the meeting agenda and methodology**: explain how the meeting will unfold; e.g. if cards are to be used, at what point they will be used and for what purpose (see subparagraph C).

B. Reviewing project or activity objectives (approximately 15 % of the AAR's total duration)

This part of the AAR answers the questions: What was expected to happen? and What were the expected objectives and deliverables? The goal is to clarify the starting point for reviewing project and team performance and achievement of objectives, which is necessary to compare the expected outcomes with those obtained.

The participants, with the facilitator's support, answer the following questions:

- Purpose and objectives of the project or activity analyzed
- Project or activity timeframe (e.g. the dates and duration of preparation and/or execution)
- Project or activity beneficiaries and other critical actors, and their respective roles
- Expected deliverables

The facilitator records the participants' answers to these questions on a flipchart.

C. Defining what actually happened and what objectives and outcomes were achieved in practice (approximately 25 % of the AAR's total duration)

The purpose of this part of the AAR is to reconstruct actual events based on all participants' viewpoints, in order to reach a shared vision. One of the techniques the facilitator can use consists of dividing the project or activity into "***critical moments***" for achieving objectives, as described below:

- ***Identifying critical moments***: a critical moment is an important step or milestone—whether positive, negative, or neutral—during the implementation of the project or activity under review.[2] Each moment has a specific objective and a set of activities that respond to that objective. Each participant identifies relevant and significant moments, from his or her perspective. Using *cards*, each participant writes down a number of critical moments (e.g. 3 to 5), one moment per card. The number of moments that the facilitator requests from participants depends on the time available for the AAR and the depth of viewpoints desired. The purpose of using cards is to reduce the group's influence on individual opinions and allow everyone to express their ideas.
- ***Creating a timeline***: the critical moments identified by each participant are placed in chronological order on a board or wall,[3] and are organized on the basis of positive moments (on the upper portion of the timeline), negative moments (lower portion), and neutral ones (on the line)—see the example in Figure 2. The moments identified by each participant will make it possible to reconstruct a timeline of the project or activity. This facilitates the reflection and maintanes focus on what worked and what did not.

D. Comparing the plan with actual results, identifying any gaps and their causes, and making recommendations (approximately 50 % of the AAR's total duration)

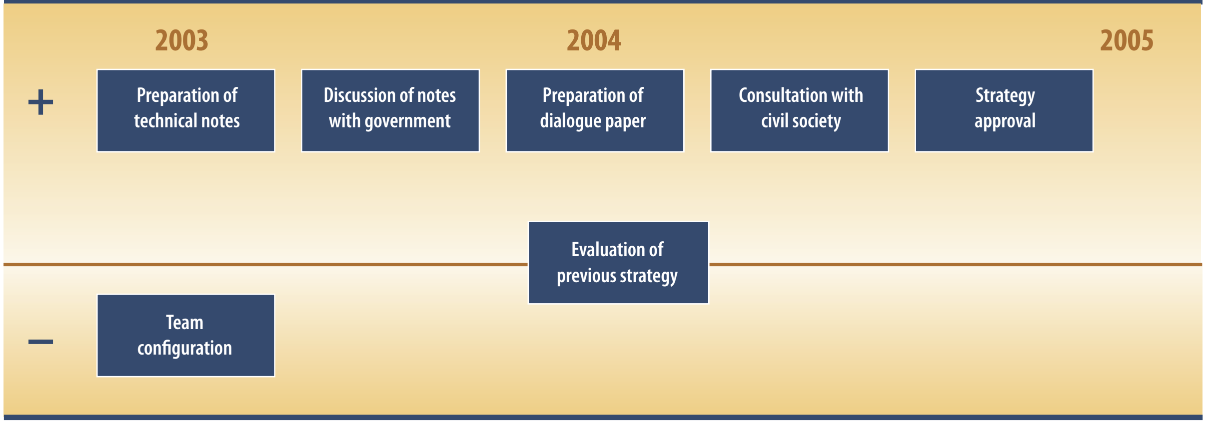
This analysis enables the team to identify lessons for purposes of revising their work hypotheses, consolidating successes achieved, and correcting any mistakes. The facilitator helps the team review what worked well, what should be improved, and what should be done differently the next time. To this end, the facilitator supports the team in:

- ***Analyzing the timeline***: with the timeline complete, the facilitator prompts participants to analyze trends that emerge, i.e., which areas are the identified critical moments concentrated around, and what moments emerge as decisive for achieving or failing to achieve project or activity objectives.

[2] For a detailed explanation of the critical moments methodology, see: M Ferreira, Sebastião. 2008. "Critical Moments Reflection Methodology: a report on its practical use, relevance, and applicability within the Inter-American Development Bank." M.I.T. Community Innovators Lab. Mimeo.

[3] Flipcharts can be used to create a surface over a board or wall on which to attach the cards. This makes it easy to collect, roll up, and transport the time line and cards at the end of the AAR.

Figure 2: Example of a timeline with critical moments



- ***Formulating review questions and identifying specific recommendations for action (lessons):*** the facilitator formulates review questions focused on critical moments that were decisive for achieving objectives. Some examples of questions include:

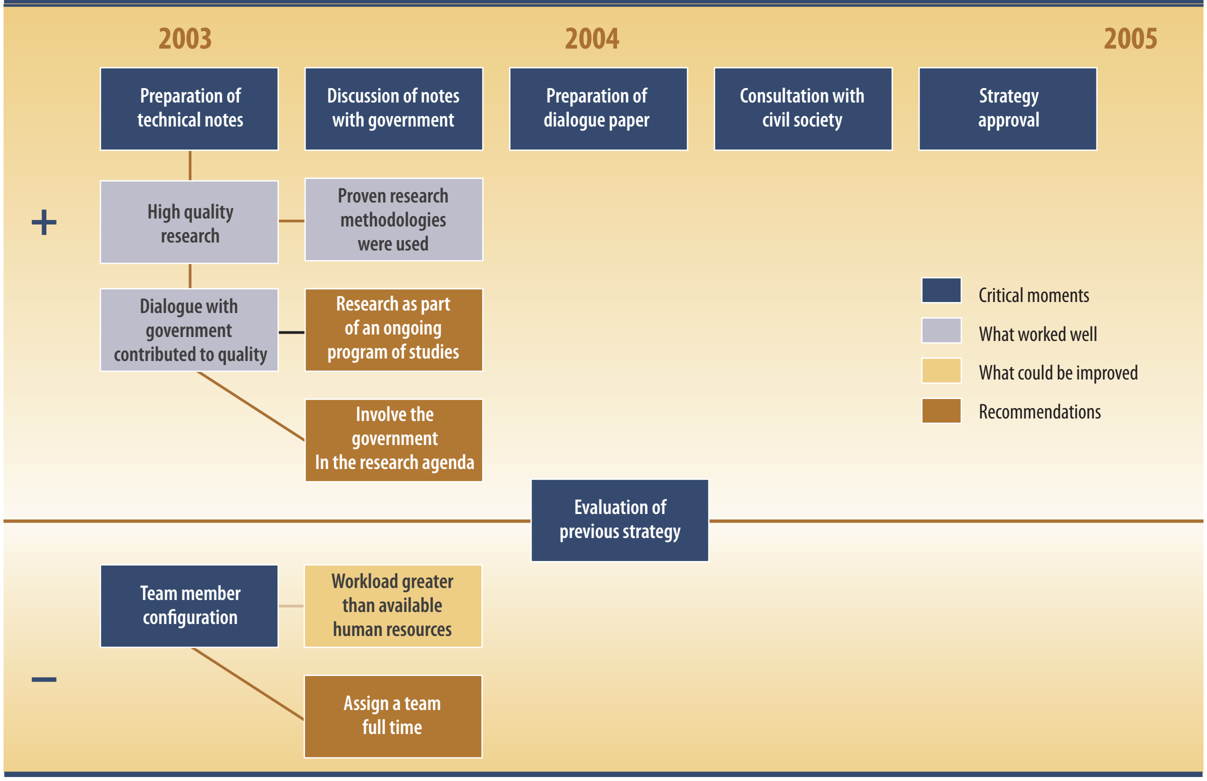
  What worked well and why? The team identifies successes and achievements worth highlighting and that can be replicated. It is important for the facilitator to help the team look into the reasons behind its success and specify the contributing factors and circumstances that could be used and adapted by other teams in similar situations. To this end, the facilitator can use cards and request that participants write one idea per card (2 to 5 ideas per person, depending on the time available). Cards are placed on the timeline, next to the relevant critical moment. When an idea does not correspond to any critical moment, perhaps a new critical moment can be identified. In this case the new critical moment is added and the card is placed next to it.

  What could have worked better? The team identifies problems and obstacles that affected performance and what can be learned from them. The team's attention should focus on going beyond description of problems and obstacles towards clarifying how these can be corrected, or prevented, in the future. Participants can continue with the card methodology, linking each idea to an identified critical moment or a new one.

  What would we do differently the next time? Participants identify specific lessons and make recommendations for action based on their experience. To the extent possible, participants link recommendations to critical moments. These links help make it possible to implement recommendations and focus on areas under the project's or activity's control. The recommendation cards are placed on the timeline, next to the relevant critical moment.

During the entire timeline analysis and review questions, the facilitator can use different colored cards to distinguish participants' contributions regarding what worked well, what could have worked better, and recommendations. This method makes identifying trends in these three areas easier for participants—see Figure 3.

Figure 3: Example of a timeline with critical moments, reflections, and recommendations (focused on two critical moments)



E. Bringing the AAR to a close and drawing conclusions (approximately 5% of an AAR's total duration)

The facilitator asks participants to share conclusions and discusses the critical issues identified during the meeting, which have been recorded on the timeline and the cards. The facilitator then presents the AAR's expected deliverables based on the report produced, and the next steps based on the AAR's purposes (e.g. comments from participants on the report, interviews to delve into specific issues, etc.).

F. Documenting the AAR and its conclusions (throughout AAR)

During the AAR process, the rapporteur captures the depth of the review at each stage and the AAR's conclusions, including the timeline, participants' contributions on what worked, what did not, and what can be improved, and the recommendations.

The AAR report allows for the review to be shared with others team members and the rest of the organization, and provides the basis for other activities and knowledge management deliverables (e.g. publications on lessons learned, identification of good practices, toolkits, information and training programs, web pages, etc.) It is important that this report accurately capture the review, thus it is recommended that a draft version be circulated for participants' comments before it is shared with others.

AAR facilitation

The facilitator's main goal is to help the team identify lessons and recommendations, especially those not previously discussed. He or she does this by ensuring that each member has the opportunity to participate, creating an appropriate climate for dialogue, and keeping time in order to complete the AAR agenda. It is recommended that the facilitator not be closely tied to the project, allowing him or her to remain neutral. Where this is not possible, a member of the team can serve as a facilitator, bearing in mind the following:

- Remain neutral during the discussion;
- Focus discussion on the project or activity being reviewed and why it turned out the way it did;
- Avoid personal attacks among team members;
- Focus analysis on those factors for improvment under the team's control and identify those which are not; and
- Encourage team recommendations instead of individual ones.

AAR report and follow-up on recommendations

Prior to drafting the report, the leaders and/or team will come to an agreement with the rapporteur as to the report audience, in accordance with the AAR's purposes. An AAR report includes the following sections:

- The target audience
- Background information regarding the project or activity analyzed;
- Name of the individuals responsible for the project and the participants in the AAR;
- Deliverables (documents, reports, videos, etc.) related to the project or activity (for reference);
- Timeline with critical moments;
- Analysis of critical moments, lessons and recommendations stemming from this analysis (can be organized in accordance with the timeline or by thematic area).

It is important to upload reports on the unit's or department's intranet, where appropriate, and facilitate access to such reports. In 2009, the Knowledge and Learning Sector (KNL) will implement a portal of lessons learned for the Bank. Teams will be invited to share their AAR reports on this portal, which will allow searches by thematic area.

The team is responsible for following up on the use and application of identified lessons and recommendations. To this end, a plan for implementing recommendations may be drafted, with tasks assigned to specific individuals and the necessary assistance and support provided for their implementation.

Chainsaw AAR

Adapted from "After Action Reviews Tips and Tactics, Wildland Fire Leadership and Development Program".

The idea behind the Chainsaw AAR is speed. It is not a substitute for a complete AAR, but it is an alternative when available time is limited. The format is simple:

1. The team sits in a circle;
2. Each member of the teams answers the following questions:
   - What is something that worked well in this activity?
   - What is something that did not work well in this activity?
   - What is something you would do differently next time? (the recommendation);
3. Continue the exercise until each member of the team has answered the questions. It is advisable to agree on a time limit for each person's intervention (e.g. 30 seconds);
4. Take notes of each member's contributions and conclusions;
5. Circulate the AAR's conclusion report to the participants for comments.

The AAR lessons captured in the report are not only useful for the team that conducted it, but are also potentially helpful for other Bank teams' learning and improvement, as well as for executing agencies and other organizations in other countries and contexts. The time investment required for an AAR is small compared with its return and its ability to provide institutional value added, the visibility it can provide to the team's work, and the opportunity to contribute to knowledge creation on relevant issues for development in the region.

KNL is supporting Bank units, divisions, and departments, as well as executing agencies, in preparing, conducting, documenting, and disseminating AARs. We invite interested staff to contact any of the Knowledge Management Division (KNL/KNM) officials identified in this document to request this support.

References

Collison, Chris, and Parcell, Geoff. 2001. *Learning to Fly*. Milford: Capstone Publishing.

Department of the Army. 1993. "A Leader's Guide to After Action Reviews. Training Circular (TC-25-20)". Washington, D.C.

U.S. Agency for International Development. 2006. "After Action Review. Technical Guidance" (PN-ADF-360)". Washington, D.C.: *http://knowledge.usaid.gov/aar.htm*

Reference resources on After Action Reviews (AARs)

IDB Resources

Inter-American Development Bank, Knowledge and Learning Sector (KNL). 2008. *Notas de Lecciones Aprendidas [Notes on Lessons Learned]*: Intranet BID Internet BID[4]

Inter-American Development Bank, Knowledge and Learning Sector (KNL). 2008. Videostreaming presentation on the Critical Moments Methodology. Presenter: Sebastião Ferreira, Community Innovators Lab, M.I.T: Intranet BID Internet BID

Ferreira, Sebastião. 2008. "Critical Moments Reflection Methodology: a report on its practical use, relevance, and applicability within the Inter-American Development Bank" M.I.T, Community Innovators Lab: Intranet BID Internet BID

Sites of interest regarding AARs

Chris Collison, Knowledge Management - Learning Whilst Doing - Facilitating an After Action Reviews.

Improvement and Development Agency for local government (IDeA) – After Action Reviews.

Mindtools – After Action Review Process.

National Health Service (UK) – Knowledge Management Specialist Library, After Action Reviews.

Wildland Fire Leadership and Development Program – After Action Reviews Tips and Tactics.

[4] For readers outsider IDB.