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Conducting an After Action Review

Introducing a learning culture into organisations can be difficult at times, particularly if the effort required it great and the benefits aren't quickly identifiable.

After Action Reviews (known as AARs) are one of the simplest knowledge management techniques, and have been used to great effect in organisations ranging from the US Army, to BP, and even in the development sector in NGOs like TearFund. Their power comes from the fact that they take little time, generate rapid results, and the approach can be easily learned and repeated. In summary, they have a "low barrier to entry".

<u>So how do you conduct an AAR?</u>

AARs are a simple way for individuals and teams to learn immediately, from both successes and failures, regardless of the length of the task in question. The learning is by the team, for the team. The format is very simple and quick - its a "pencil and paper" or flipchart exercise. In an open and honest meeting, usually no longer than twenty minutes, each participant in the event answers four simple questions:

- **What was supposed to happen?**
- **What actually happened?**
- **Why were there differences?**
- **What can we learn from that?**

The guidelines below are drawn from the book "Learning to Fly - Practical knowledge management from leading and learning organisations – Chris Collison and Geoff Parcell), and sets out the key steps to facilitating an effective After Action Review.

<u>1. Hold the AAR immediately.</u> AARs 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.

<u>2. Create the right climate.</u> 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 or audits. They certainly should not be treated as personal performance evaluation. The US Army describe an environment where "you pin your stripes to the wall" before starting an AAR.

<u>3. Appoint a facilitator.</u> The facilitator of an AAR is not there to "give" answers, but to help the team to "learn" answers. Learning must be drawn out, both from the individual and for the group?s learning.

<u>4. Ask "what was supposed to happen?"</u> 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 question: "What was supposed to happen?"

5. Ask "what actually happened"? This means the team must understand and agree facts about what happened. Facts - not opinions. Remember, the aim is to identify a problem or learning point - 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 (initially on a flipchart) 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.

That's all there is to it. Why not build an AAR into the agenda of your next major team meeting, training event, negotiation or project review meeting? You'll be surprised at how quickly you learn what you didn't know.