Learning from Action:
Imbedding More Learning into The Performance Fast Enough to Make a Difference

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Change is a forgone conclusion. The question is not whether change is happening but how we respond. Can we learn fast enough to keep up? Can we adapt and respond in new ways rather than rely on old habits? Will our skills shift quickly enough to allow us to perform? Much of what we do in human resource management, leadership development, and change management is designed to help people adapt to the new reality, and it is good work, but it is often not done fast enough. By the time that skills are developed, culture is modified, programs are implemented, or structure is redesigned, the world has changed again. We have skills, culture, and organizations perfectly designed to meet the needs of the past, but we never catch up with the future. Gordon Sullivan, recently retired Chief of Staff of the US Army, refers to this as “making the past perfect.” We are always behind and always responding to yesterday’s problems.

Consider, for example, the way we typically structure learning and development activities in organizations. Much of what we do assumes that the more real issues we include in the learning process, the more likely people will develop usable skills. We write real cases, focusing on current organization issues; we bring organization problems into the classroom. We adopt action learning programs in which we convene groups, help them get up to speed on their skills, and then give them actual work-related assignments. Most recently we have gone on-line with learning, so people can ask for help and get input when and where they need it. By all of these efforts, we are trying to get more performance into the learning process. All this makes a contribution, but it is often not fast enough or grounded enough in performance to keep up with the pace of change.

If we shift our perspective from “getting more performance into the learning process” to “getting more learning into the performance process,” a whole new set of approaches can be added to our arsenal. We move from action learning to learning from action. Now the issue becomes how to help individuals, groups and organizations learn from their performance. Performing and learning are not sequential or overlapping, but learning is a byproduct of performance. From this perspective, the objec-
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tive is to get the plan and action steps "roughly right," use the skills you already have, get on with it, and learn as you go. Things change too quickly, so why waste time trying to predict and understand a future that is neither predictable nor understandable until you get there? Take the best guess you can, do the best you can, and learn as you go.

One of the best examples of "getting more learning into the performance process" is toddlers learning to walk. They have a rough idea of what they want to do, spend very little time worrying about whether they can or cannot do it, move to action quickly, and learn as they go. They have no concept of failure. Falling simply means that they are not yet walking. At no time does a toddler, having fallen to the ground yet again, say, "Oh well, I didn't want to walk anyway. I guess I'll just stay down here on the ground." No, toddlers just keep trying. But there are lessons from youngsters that we can learn that go well beyond simply sticking something out until it's mastered.

First, there is their drive to perform. They are relentless. Second is how they learn: They learn as part of performing—they advance from sitting to crawling and from crawling to taking steps while hanging onto the couch. All is learned by trying and failing. In time, they are now ready for the biggest event of their lives: walking under their own power. Unlike adults too, they have absolutely no problem with the concept that they will have to learn while trying to perform. It works for them, and it should work the same for us. We should be able to learn while performing and to apply our learning quickly to performance.

The third lesson we can learn from youngsters has to do with the speed of youngsters' learning cycles. Kids try and fail, they learn, they try again. They can fail faster than any adult, and they get up and try again just as fast. As adults, we spend far too much time worrying about whether we will fall or not. And we spend far too much time worrying about what we know. Rather than focus on either, we should focus on doing and learning. What you know does not count until it is applied. A les-
son is not learned until behavior changes. Something has to happen. Kids are always involved in mischief because they are always trying out what they have learned. Adults don’t understand or appreciate this. Their learning cycle is faster. As we strive to get more learning into our performance process, however, we do have an advantage over children: We can think about what needs to be done and structure a process for learning. Let’s look at how that ability was used at one organization.

THE CHALLENGE

Analog Devices designs, manufactures, and markets a broad line of high-performance linear, mixed-signal, and digital-integrated circuits that address a wide range of real-world signal-processing applications. It competes in a marketplace that demands constant innovation and the rapid delivery of new products. If the organization does not learn quickly, it’s out of business.

In the Transportation and Industrial Products Division (T&IPD) of the organization, which is responsible for new product development, engineers work with specific customers to design and deliver customized products. Three years ago, as part of a TQM initiative, product development teams were redesigned; traditional functional groups were replaced by cross-functional product development (PD) teams assigned to specific customers. Development times were reduced, costs went down, and on-time delivery went up. But the division had to do better. Too much time and too many resources were being wasted by each group working independently. The teams were making the same mistakes since learning across teams was not taking place. Improvements were not shared. A team would do something to improve performance but the other teams had no way of finding out except through random conversations in the hall or via the company’s intranet.

In the engineering culture, however, people were not interested in improving performance by learning new problem solving skills or developing more team processing capabili-

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ties. These were seen as “touchy-feely” and the payoff too slow. The division needed an approach that focused on the task at hand rather than process. They needed to imbed learning into their performance process. For a solution, the organization turned to the U.S. Army.

LEARNING FROM ACTION: THE AFTER ACTION REVIEW (AAR)

Curtis Davis, a product line director in T&IPD, adapted the After Action Review from the U.S. Army to capture learning and improve communication within and across teams in his division. The After Action Review (AAR) is a way for a team to reflect on and learn while it is performing. Unlike other project postmortems, you do not wait until the patient is dead to figure out what went wrong. The objective is to learn as you perform; that is, to understand why interim objectives were not accomplished, what lessons could be learned, and how those lessons could be quickly driven back into the performance process.

Guidelines on how AAR can imbed learning into performance are listed in Exhibit 1. First, focus on a few critical performance issues. The purpose is not to do a process debriefing or to discuss every aspect of the situation. Rather, the purpose is to focus on how to improve performance. Find a few key factors and get back to performing. The AAR works best if done during the action or very quickly thereafter. It should be a structured approach, involving the whole group or unit. Multiple perspectives are included and a structured process is followed. And lastly, it works if learning can be captured and quickly moved back to action.

WHAT LEARNING FROM ACTION IS NOT

To understand an AAR, it also helps to understand what learning from action is not. First, it is not about fixing individual blame. Nor is its
EXHIBIT 1
AN AFTER ACTION REVIEW WORKS BEST IF IT IS:

Focused on the few critical issues
Done immediately after the action
Inclusive of the whole group
In accordance with a structured process
Leading back to action quickly

purpose to grade the success or failure of an individual or a team. Instead, it is about learning how to improve the work process. As such, it cannot occur in an environment of fear and retribution. People must believe what they say will be used to drive improvement, not to punish.

Second, Learning from Action is not a replacement for other formal processes like quality management's Plan-Do-Check-Act. Both are about analysis, action, and better results. The focus of a quality management process is to solve a given problem, to close a known gap between what is desired and what exists today. In contrast, the focus of Learning from Action is on recent action, whether successful or not. In fact, a group could engage in learning how well it executed a quality management process.

Finally, Learning from Action is not about discussion at the expense of action. Instead, it is about action: taking better future action by learning from current action. Members of large organizations often observe that one of their weaknesses is their inability to get to action after analysis and drive for results. Learning from Action should be a way to become more action-oriented, not a way to do more analysis.

THE AFTER ACTION REVIEW:
A PROCESS OF LEARNING AS YOU GO

The After Action Review is, as described, a structured process for learning as you go:

Step 1: What was the intent?
The first step of an AAR is to review what the intent was when the action began. What was the purpose of the action? What were you trying to accomplish? How was it to be accomplished? For example: Was the purpose of the meeting to communicate a certain message? Was the action an attempt to implement a faster business process?

Step 2: What happened?
What exactly occurred? Why? How? What were the results? Recalling accurately what happened is usually difficult but nevertheless is essential if the team is to draw the right lessons and take better action in the future. This is why it is important to conduct AARs soon after the action and why multiple perspectives are valuable. For example: What was said to Jones prior to the product being shipped? Who was involved in the design process? This is a step to get to the facts, not to blame anyone but to understand the steps taken by the team as it tried to achieve its intent.

There are two approaches that can be taken during the “what happened” discussion. The first is to ask members to reconstruct events chronologically: “First we did this, then that,” and so on. The second is to ask members to recall what they saw as key events; that is, events they think are important to analyze further. “The reorganization was announced,” or “the equipment arrived,” might be examples. Either can achieve the same end: constructing a picture of what happened that the team agrees is valid.

SPRING 1999 23
EXHIBIT 2

CONDUCTING AN AAR

Who:
The AAR should involve all those who were the closest to the action, regardless of level. The goal is to gain all needed perspectives for both learning and action.

What:
You need not conduct an AAR after every event or action. Select those you can learn most from or where improvement would be most valuable.

When:
Conduct the AAR as soon as possible, when memories are fresh.

Where:
Hold your AAR anywhere that promotes openness and learning: a conference room, meeting facility, or a place that is significant to a review of the events, such as where the action happened. Don’t, however, let the choice of a location unduly delay you. The key is to do the AAR as close to the action in time and space as possible.

Why:
Again, the purpose of the AAR is to promote learning while the experience is fresh and, most importantly, more quickly to improve action.

How long:
A good AAR can be brief; less than an hour. Fifteen minutes is better, but enough time should be available to promote a full discussion to get the team to the next action step.

Step 3: What have we learned?
Based on what we tried to do and what actually happened, what did we learn? What do we know now that we did not know before we started? What focused lessons have we learned? If someone else were to start down the same path, what advice would we give this person?

Step 4: What do we do now?
Based on what we know now, what should we do? Because the focus of an AAR is on action, and especially action that can be applied quickly to accelerate progress, it is important to think of action implications as occurring along three different “horizons”: short-term, mid-term, and long-term. Thinking of what can be done in all three time horizons helps a team avoid the trap of just implementing actions that take a long time to produce benefits.

Short-term actions are those that can be taken quickly and will have immediate benefits: for example, making a phone call, stopping an activity, making an expenditure.

Mid-term actions are those that affect systems, policies, practices, and the organization; for example, implementing a bonus system, hiring people with new skills, starting up a learning network.

Long-term actions are those related to basic strategies, goals, and values: for example, developing a better shared understanding of what “innovation” means, promoting better listening skills, or redefining a strategic intent.

Step 5: Take action.
Lessons are of no use unless applied. A lesson is not a learned until something changes.
Step 6: Tell someone else.
Who else needs to know what you have learned? What do they need to know? How are you going to tell them? Leverage what you know to other units and throughout the organization.

LEADING AN AAR
The leader’s job is to promote focused, open, provocative, safe, reality-oriented exchange among team members so that in an AAR genuine learning can take place. The job is not to have the answers but to facilitate a good discussion.

- **Follow the rule of objectivity.** Because much of the AAR is about recreating the reality of events and getting out the facts, it is important that the team be objective. Jumping too quickly to what a given person thinks was “really going on,” what so-and-so was “really up to,” will only lead to misdiagnosis, misunderstanding, and ineffective action. Likewise, you should try to stay away from referring to one’s intent or purpose. The rule of objectivity, like Sergeant Joe Friday of the old Dragnet television series, asks AAR participants to give “Just the facts, ma’am.”

What does it mean to give just the facts? It means sticking to descriptions of what could be observed, where what could be observed becomes primarily what individuals either said or did. For example: “John called me and told me that the new contract was signed.”

- **Balance inquiry and advocacy.** Because an AAR is about discovering the “why” behind what happened—the cause and effect relationships involved and about planning effective actions, it is important that participants take care to understand each other and to feel comfortable that each has grasped what was said rather than talking past each other.

Balancing inquiry and advocacy asks us to focus less on advocating our own views and more on understanding others’ views through inquiry. To engage in inquiry is actively to seek further understanding of another person’s position. It requires one to probe, restate positions, and seek clarification: “So you’re saying that?” or “I understand your conclusion that there is a lot of red tape around; could you say more about how you think this caused our problem?” or “Can you give an example of what you mean?”

- **Climb the ladder of inference.** There are three rungs on this ladder. The bottom rung represents our experience at the level of direct observation. It is the raw material from which our conclusions came. People said things; people did things; these actions were followed by further words and deeds. This rung of the ladder represents our experience as a videotape recorder might capture it or as we might discuss it when we’re practicing the rule of objectivity.

We don’t focus on every detail of our experience. Instead we select what we think is relevant. Selecting, consolidating, and validating are on the second rung of the ladder.

Next, we compare our current and past experience. The next two rungs of the ladder represent this process: we apply our understanding from past experience to our new experience, and in the process make assumptions about how to explain what we saw or heard.

At this point we reach the rung on the ladder that represents our final conclusions, which is followed by action. We arrive at a conclusion that represents a complex process of making inferences from directly observable data. Thus: the “ladder of inference.”

What does this all have to do with learning from action? The purpose of the AAR is to arrive at a shared understanding of not only what happened in a given situation but why it happened and what could be done differently next time. Shared understanding requires that we not only know what others have concluded but why. What are their assumptions, past experiences, and biases for action? If we do not help others see how we got from what we observed to what we concluded, then, however much we may not
want, we will most likely, once again, simply contribute to a process of “talking past” one another.

- Ready, fire, aim, aim, aim. The bias for action mentioned above is captured in the operating principle of “ready, fire, aim, aim, aim.” Like the “smart-bomb” that fires and adjusts as it moves toward its target, the action too can begin, after a reasonable but not over-long analysis, to readjust as you move ahead. You plan, certainly; but you don’t have to dot every “I” and cross every “t” before taking a step. The team can take action, learn from the results, correct, share with others, and stay in action until it achieves its goals.

IMPLEMENTING THE AAR

The product development teams at Analog integrated the AARs into their work activity at four different levels.

1 AAR and Product Development Teams: Adding Value Within Teams

Each PD team is working on one project with many interrelated tasks; weekly meetings are held to track progress on these various projects.

Prior to the introduction of the AAR, the teams functioned more like a group of individuals than an interdependent team. Each week the team leader would struggle to get his/her members to quantify their progress and current status on the project. During the discussion, members would pay attention only when it was immediately relevant to them. Otherwise, they would drift off, attend to their individual business, etc.

The AAR was seen as a potential means of reducing redundancy, quantifying performance, and improving communication at the weekly team meetings. The AAR was introduced to one PD team using a facilitator who would capture the discussions on a flip chart. While effective in illustrating the usefulness of the AAR process, this format proved to be extremely slow. It prompted the team to implement a different format. On a weekly basis, each member prepares a single-page statement of their performance and progress using the steps of the AAR. Then when they come together, they are prepared to quickly start talking about common issues.

The AAR has proven to be an extremely useful tool for tracking performance, and it has subsequently been adopted by the other PD teams. Of note here is that the successful implementation of the tool was the result of the team’s decision to change the format. According to the team’s facilitator, the team would have categorically rejected the idea if it had come from either the team leader or facilitator. It was still viewed as too “touchy feely.”

Team leaders report that the AAR process adds value to the team; team meetings are more focused, time management is better, member participation has increased, more information is being shared, and the interdependencies among the team members are being illuminated and understood (e.g. “If you did X with your part, I need to do Y now.”) Furthermore, the process of listing “just the facts” frequently gives people a different perspective on a problem; this helps to clarify differences and resolve conflicts more easily.

Chrysler is another corporation using the AAR process. At critical points in the product development process teams stop and do an analysis of what they have accomplished and the lessons they have learned. They have found that there is substantial value to learning as you go; the real payoff comes when they apply their lessons learned back into their own work and aggressively share with others doing comparable work.

2 AAR and Semi-Quarterly Business Review (SQBR): Adding Value Across Teams

The same one-page AAR format is also used at the six-week Semi-Quarterly Business Review (SQBR) at Analog Devices. These meetings are attended by team leaders of the various PD teams and the product line director. Using the AAR, team leaders review the objectives and summarize the status of
their projects. They also discuss any problems that their team encountered, the lessons learned, and the ways in which these problems were resolved. In this case, the AAR goes beyond tracking the performance of each team to learning across teams. The AAR provides the teams with a common language, format, and means of sharing and documenting lessons learned. What one team learns can quickly be assessed and adapted by other teams.

Exhibit 3 illustrates the format used by the PD teams at Analog. The chart shows various examples taken from one SQBR meeting of how AAR was used to keep the process focused and communicated across business unit.

3 AAR and the Customer: Adding Value to the Customer Relationship

At Analog Devices, the AAR was also introduced by a PD team as a means of building more successful customer relationships. A Japanese customer came on site at Analog for a week to review product design. At the conclusion of the week-long visit, the team conducted a formal AAR with the customer with the explicit objectives of reviewing the design issues and building a better relationship with the customer. In addition to identifying some key design issues, this two-hour discussion illuminated some critical trust and communication deficiencies. Consequently, the action steps focused on clarifying issues such as how to communicate with each other and where documents would be stored so that people could access relevant data, as well as on specific design issues. The final result of this AAR was to significantly increase the level of trust between the customer and the PD team. The customer was so impressed with the AAR that he wrote down the format so that he could take it with him back to Japan.

4 AAR and Improving the Product Development Process: Adding Value Across Divisions

A common product development process is used across divisions. The AAR became the way of capturing, showing, and driving improvement into the product development process itself. Analog has a formal review of each product four quarters after it has been released into production. The team does an AAR to identify the key issues and problems. It makes recommendations, which are fed across divisions to other product development teams. The results from the multiple teams are then consolidated to make changes in the product development process itself.

BP’S EXPERIENCE

British Petroleum has had similar experiences with the AAR in all four of these areas. BP was attracted to the AAR by the quickness with which it can be done and by its direct relationship to the performance activity. It began by embedding the AAR in its meeting process to drive the effectiveness of drilling teams. British Petroleum then uses video-conferencing capability to disseminate the results of AARs throughout the organization and across the many functions needed to support drilling. This way the whole organization can learn rather than limit payoff to one team.

Next, British Petroleum began using the AAR process in Japan to build retail sites. The learning captured when one site is completed is quickly passed to the next one to be built shortening production time and reducing costs. In Vietnam and other countries, the organization is using it as a way to evaluate and improve customer and government relations. Some customers have been so impressed with the results that they have begun using the AAR process.

THE PAYOFFS

The U.S. Army has had the most experience with After Action Reviews, having done them for ten years. Everyone is used to taking time quickly out of action to do a “hot wash,” which happens during the action, or a “cold wash,” which is done after the action is completed. For the Army, the pay-
## Exhibit 3: The Semi-Quarterly Business Review (AAR)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STEP 1</th>
<th>STEP 2</th>
<th>STEP 3</th>
<th>STEP 4</th>
<th>STEP 5</th>
<th>STEP 6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INTENT</td>
<td>WHAT HAPPENED? WHY?</td>
<td>LESSONS LEARNED</td>
<td>ACTION</td>
<td>DISSEMINATING</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objective</td>
<td>What happened</td>
<td>Why did this happen</td>
<td>What are the implications</td>
<td>Who, what, and where?</td>
<td>Who needs to know</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Start correlation and final test board</td>
<td>Not started</td>
<td>Unrealistic estimate by team leader</td>
<td>Unmet expectations</td>
<td>Get buy-in from team members for schedule estimates</td>
<td>Team leader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complete debug of xyz board</td>
<td>Completed on schedule</td>
<td>John worked lots of overtime</td>
<td>Stress. Any unplanned problems would have pushed out schedule since we already working max hours. No buffer</td>
<td>Should have allowed more time in schedule to complete this task</td>
<td>Review all trim to accommodate package parameters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Release trim</td>
<td>Trim not released</td>
<td>Sam T. is multiplexed between too many tasks</td>
<td>Sam will continue to run production trim for #1 if trim is not released. Sam will not focus on #1 if he continues to be distracted by other projects.</td>
<td>Release of program is jeopardized without focused resources</td>
<td>Release #1 trim by 2/1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deliver fully functional units in June to customer</td>
<td>Package cracks identified during engineering look-ahead</td>
<td>Assembly engineer performed tests prior to package qual.</td>
<td>Package being redesigned</td>
<td>Perform engineering look-ahead tests on new package</td>
<td>Results of package redesign due late</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Off comes when insights are discovered and immediately applied to action. For example, when the troops went into Haiti, AARs helped Army personnel learn as they deployed and adjusted to an ambiguous and new situation. This was the first time Army troops were deployed off of a Navy aircraft carrier and it was unclear if it was to be a peacekeeping or a combat mission. As the 82nd Airborne and the 10th Mountain Division arrived in Haiti, units implemented lessons learned using AARs. As would be expected, each unit improved from its own perspective, based on its own experiences. But when efforts were consolidated, higher level solutions also began to emerge. One unit located on the aircraft carrier Eisenhower, for example, discovered an immediate problem. The hallways and stairs of an aircraft carrier are designed for
efficient and quick movement of Navy personnel. Army personnel with 80 lb. packs cannot go up and down the stairs easily, and it is impossible to pass in hallways. The challenge was how quickly to move 3,000 troops from lower to higher decks. The solution developed in an AAR: Use the large elevators designed to raise the aircraft to the upper decks to transport the troops and their gear.

Another unit discovered a shortage of water. The soldiers' water consumption was much higher than expected because of heat and humidity. The need for drinkable water increased dramatically. The AAR developed solutions that called for supply lines to be opened and units responsible for supplying drinkable water moved up quickly. Another unit looked at its supply of intravenous medical equipment and projected a shortage. The heat and humidity were causing dehydration problems. More soldiers than expected were passing out and needed IVs. The standard medical supplies brought in by the troops needed to be modified. Solutions to these problems provided valuable lessons at the local level and improved operational efficiency.

As the lessons learned and their solutions were being fed to the Center for Army Lessons Learned, analysts examined all the units together and came to the conclusion that all three had related issues. Since soldiers were carrying 80lbs of equipment in high temperature and humidity, they were losing more body fluid than normal. The suggested solution was to have soldiers reduce what they carried to the bare essentials for a peacekeeping operation. This might reduce the physical exertion enough to prevent them from perspiring so heavily, cutting down on loss of body fluid and therefore minimizing the need for so much water and IVs. To test the principle, one unit was directed to reduce its carrying load. The test was successful. The command went out to all units to minimize pack loads.

Not only did the knowledge acquired by this solution have immediate effects but it was passed on to follow-on units that deployed to Haiti. Similar lessons collected during disaster assistance in the aftermath of Hurricane Andrew in Florida, Somalia, Rwanda, and Bosnia have also been disseminated by CALL and archived for future peacekeeping operations. The AAR has proved to be an invaluable tool in assessing issues that have an impact on the ability of U.S. Army forces to complete their missions.

GTE is applying the same concepts in its management and executive development programs. In the programs managers learn how to do and actually do AARs that capture learning from experience. These are consolidated and integrated into a knowledge base that is available throughout the corporation. Knowledge developed in one area has an impact on many. Based on these experiences we can identify four payoffs of AARs:

1. **Structured, purposeful dialogue.** When a structured process for learning is used, you are guided through a review of intent, what happened, lessons learned, and then action. Following the proper steps ensures that the discussion progresses and is focused. The structure guides participants through a discussion toward a clear and valuable end.

2. **Breaking hierarchical barriers.** By emphasizing multiple perspectives, learning from action promotes an environment in which what is said becomes more important than who said it. Everyone's input is valued. While no formal process can guarantee this mindset, a structured process can promote it. The formal leader becomes facilitator, thus further breaking down hierarchical barriers. His or her role is not to give answers or to decide content but to promote an effective, productive discussion that leads to valuable learning lessons.

3. **Reflection close to action.** The skill of reflecting on one's actions may be the most important skill for any manager or leader. Through reflection, we come to understand ourselves better, as well as others and our business. From this understanding comes
continuous improvement. Experience and action are continuous teachers, but only for those who are able and willing to use them. AARs promote reflection by offering a formal process to practice it. Widespread use of AARs will encourage us to learn and reflect as a matter of course.

4 Recorded lessons. One of the last steps is to record what has been learned from analysis. Recording lessons has a number of important benefits. First, the act of writing down both lessons and action plans prompts us to clarify our thinking, condense our words, and weed out ambiguity in our conclusions. Second, recording lessons helps to retain them. They endure as a reference and are not easily forgotten. Lessons lost are typically those not written down. Finally, recorded lessons are easier to share with others. People across the business can benefit from what one team has done. Sharing learning in this way will accelerate the rate of organizational improvement.

WHEN THINGS DON’T GO WELL

Drawing from the experiences across these and other organizations, we can identify three potential explanations if you do not get payoff.

1 Improper Use of the AAR: A One-Person Show. The AAR was used by one particular team leader as a vehicle for lecturing his team about what he saw as the problems it was facing. Instead of engaging everyone who had been involved in the action in an AAR, he came to the meeting with his own perspective and agenda and made a presentation to the team. After that, his team was very reluctant to engage in future AARs. Such an example highlights the importance of having the entire team participate in the discussion, working together to discover what happened, and why. Team leaders who have used the tool successfully have found that the insight gained from multiple perspectives is one of the biggest advantages of the AAR.

2 The Wrong Motive: AAR Used to Punish. In a second example, the AAR was used inappropriately to control and punish a team member whose performance was not meeting the team’s expectations. Since the team was experiencing some difficulties, the team facilitator suggested that all team members prepare in advance for an AAR by writing out their own, one-page mini-AAR on their performance. When the team gathered for the AAR, the team leader opted to have the questionable performer present. Rather than using this opportunity to conduct an AAR discussion with all team members, the team leader used the tool to criticize and punish one member. Following this, the other team members balked. Viewing it as a form of punishment and control, they refused to present their own mini-reviews, calling it “micromanagement.” Not surprisingly, this team has a very negative view of the AAR.

3 Not Moving to Action. Another team kept doing the AAR correctly but nothing ever happened. It would come to conclusions that were not implemented. Next time the team came together, not surprisingly members were not willing to spend much real energy in reviewing what they had learned during the last phase of the product development process.

Few managers today would argue with the value of learning from action. The After Action Review is one tool useful for getting “more learning into the performance process.” Its payoff comes from two factors: Much of today’s work is done in teams, and one of the greatest sources of learning is learning from experience—both of which are consistent with the purpose and method of AAR. The payoffs are immediate and cost nothing to implement. Combined with action learning tools already available, learning and performance become even more tightly integrated. Consider the following:

- The process of listing facts, rather than opinions, helps clarify problems
- The non-blaming approach allows for
new perspectives to emerge
- Many and varied perspectives on a problem lead to new learning
- It provides a common language for addressing performance and learning needs
- It helps to build customer relationships
- The lessons learned from other teams save both time and effort by reducing repetitive errors

Providing a clear structure, After Action Reviews guide an effective learning process all the way to action. However, they also promote a better dialogue and constructive conflict. Thus AARs have a dual purpose: to achieve immediate results while building the capability to achieve even better results in the future.

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SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY


The skills needed to learn from action are best described in Peter Senge’s seminal work *The Fifth Discipline* (Doubleday, New York, 1990) and Chris Argyris’ article “Education for Leading-Learning” (*Organizational Dynamics, Summer 1992*). The leadership skills required are described by Richard Pascale, Mark Millemann, and Linda Gioja’s article “Changing the Way We Change” (*Harvard Business Review, November/December 1997*).