

After Action Reviews

By contrasting our intended results with our actual results, we reveal important insights, lessons learned, and motivation for improvement.

Social innovators are constantly testing new approaches, and then adapting based on insights gained from experience. Strategic learning supports **institutional memory**, just-in-time **iteration**, and **clarifying our hypotheses about our work**. These learning practices allow us to make our thinking visible to each other, strengthening our hypotheses and uncovering hidden assumptions.

After Action Reviews (AARs) are a tool that can add structure to Strategic Learning. Conducted following an activity or event, AARs use a series of questions to help **clarify desired results, plan for anticipated challenges, and reflect on what actually occurred to identify potential ways to improve the next time.**¹ AARs align with many Quality Improvement practices, balancing intended outcomes with actual results.

This tool supports:

- Continuous quality improvement through “real-time” documented feedback and analysis of what really happened compared to what was intended;
- Decentralizes and archives organizational learning;
- Builds team engagement and trust through shared learning.

The Institute for Child and Family Well-being (ICFW) team at Children’s Wisconsin has used AARs to uncover insights from recent project activities and innovations, clinical practices, and dissemination events. AARs are used in two formats: a written form completed by individuals or a team, or a facilitated AAR where a facilitator leads participants through the process to get at the core lessons learned, while also provoking exploration into greater depth of reflection and analysis. The facilitator in the latter format is often more removed from the project or outcome than the participants, which can aid in identifying and developing lessons learned.

At the ICFW, we have identified **core principles** from our use of After Action Reviews:

- **Trust is the key to learning.** If participants feel that the AAR is used to judge their actions, they will be less likely to honestly share their experience, which limits learning.
- AARs are most effective when **conducted within days** of completing an activity or event;

¹ <https://centerforcommunityinvestment.org/blog/what-does-it-look-be-learning-organization>

- **Choose a set length of time to complete AARs.** This determines how in depth the review will go. If the AAR is set for an hour or less, the answers will likely yield the biggest takeaways; whereas, longer stretches may yield deeper undercurrents and propose more ambitious changes.
- **Conducting various AARs** on the same activity or event with **multiple participants** unveils both diversity and consensus in the answers, while also revealing whether or not the team was operating towards the same objectives and hypotheses.
- Develop a process to **ensure that lessons learned are integrated into future practice.**

AAR Lessons Learned by ICFW

1. Completion of an AAR is strongly encouraged after any activity or project that had the following occur:
 - a. Novel practice;
 - b. An unexpected outcome;
 - c. A compelling anecdote that illustrates a lesson learned, the evidence, etc.
2. Completion of an AAR is strongly encouraged after each service, training session, or presentation that is in its Prototype phase.
3. When a novel activity or project is being introduced, schedule a facilitated AAR to be conducted immediately upon completion of the activity or project.
 - a. Facilitated AARs can also be requested during implementation if significant challenges or successes arise.
4. Completed AARs must be posted on Basecamp (or similar shared project management tool).
5. Upon submission of AAR, identify Dissemination opportunities and a new Gut Check for any new proposed activities.
6. Reviewing AARs briefly during team meetings and more thoroughly once a month. During the lengthier review, the team will be exploring the following:
 - a. Is there content from the AAR that can be disseminated?
 - b. Is there content from the AAR that could lead to a new activity or project?

Resources & Citations

The AAR was developed by the United States government and used by USAID.

VA Center for Implementation Practice and Research Support

<https://cebma.org/assets/Uploads/Salem-Schatz-Guide-to-the-After-Action-Review.pdf>

World Health Organization (video)

<https://www.who.int/emergencies/operations/emergency-response-reviews/after-action-review#>

Center for Community Investment - <https://centerforcommunityinvestment.org>

After Action Review – Individual Form

Date:

Project:

Activity:

1. What were our intended results?
What was the purpose and objectives?
What outcomes and outputs were intended?
What facilitators and barriers were expected?
2. What were our actual results?
Be specific.
3. What caused our results?
What went well and why?
What were the successful steps taken towards achieving your objective?
What went poorly and why?
4. What will we sustain?
How do we carry forward what went really well?
5. What will we improve?
How do we modify or eliminate what led to what went poorly?
6. Has this practice been easy to apply? Could others be shown how to apply it?
What would be needed?
7. What are the key lessons learned?
We should be seeking to build on best practice as much as we can, and identifying strategies to ensure that successful practices are built in to future work and repeated.
We should also acknowledge and share those unsuccessful practices to ensure that we don't repeat them.
8. What are our next steps?
Disseminate lessons learned?
Gut check for a new proposed activity or prototype?
Evaluation?

For a facilitation guide or a group version, click this link or scan the QR code to reach out to us:

<https://uwm.edu/icfw/services-inquiry/>

