After Action Review and Lessons Learned

An after action review, or AAR, is a structured discussion held after a project or event to learn from it. The US Army developed the method to help units learn quickly from training exercises, and many businesses and public bodies later adopted it. It is built around four simple questions, asked in the same order each time. The goal is learning, not blame. The lessons that come out of it are written down and shared, so the next team does not repeat the same mistakes. Lina, an events manager, uses it after every conference.

1. What Was Supposed to Happen?

The first question is what was supposed to happen. The team restates the goals, the plan and the measures of success before looking at results. Without this shared starting point, people remember different plans and the discussion goes in circles. Everyone should be able to answer in a few sentences. Short, clear answers are better than long speeches.

Example: A family trip was meant to leave at eight in the morning and reach the beach by noon. Using the first question, the family restates that plan before judging the trip, so everyone discusses the same target.

At work: After a conference, Lina starts with the first question: what was supposed to happen? The team writes down the plan: four hundred guests, a start at nine and no queue at registration.

2. What Actually Happened?

The second question is what actually happened. The team describes the facts as they were, using records, numbers and what people saw. We separate facts from opinions and from guesses about reasons. Everyone adds their part, because each person saw a different piece of the event. A complete picture comes from many voices.

Example: The family trip took longer than planned. Using the second question, they list what actually happened: they left at nine and arrived at one because of traffic and a late lunch stop. The facts are on the table without any argument.

At work: Lina asks what actually happened. The registration data shows that three hundred and sixty guests came, and the queue at the door lasted forty minutes.

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3. Why Was There a Difference?

The third question is why there was a difference between the plan and the result. We look for causes in the process, such as unclear roles, missing information or tight timing. We often ask why more than once to move from symptoms to root causes. We do not look for someone to blame, because blame makes people hide facts. We also ask why things went well, so that good results can be repeated.

Example: The family was late for lunch. Using the third question, they ask why: nobody checked the traffic, and the bags were packed at the last minute. They find causes, not culprits.

At work: Lina asks why there was a difference. The team finds that only two desks opened at the door, because the third staff member was never given a clear role.

4. What Will We Do Next Time?

The fourth question turns the discussion into lessons learned. We decide what to keep doing, what to change and who will do it. Each lesson should be specific, written down and shared with people who will need it. Without action, a review is only a conversation. A short follow-up later checks that the changes really happened.

Example: The family wants a calmer trip next time. Using the fourth question, they decide to leave an hour earlier and to check the road the night before. They write it on the fridge, so the next trip is easier.

At work: Lina uses the fourth question: next time, three desks with named staff and a pre-registration email. She adds the lesson to the team's shared file, and the next conference opens without a queue.

Conclusion

In summary, an after action review is a structured discussion that turns experience into learning. The US Army developed it, and it is now widely used in many fields. Four questions guide it: what was supposed to happen, what actually happened, why there was a difference and what we will do next time. It focuses on facts and causes, not on blame. Lina's team now holds a review after every event, so each project makes the next one better.

Sources

• NASA APPEL Knowledge Services: After Action Review (describes the US Army method and its four questions) – https://appel.nasa.gov/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/After-Action-Review.pdf

• Garvin, D. A., Edmondson, A. C. and Gino, F. (2008). Is Yours a Learning Organization? Harvard Business Review, March 2008 – https://hbr.org/2008/03/is-yours-a-learning-organization

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