The After Action Review

By Tim Kelley

The After Action Review (AAR) is a professional discussion of an event, focused on performance standards that allows cadets to discover for themselves <u>what</u> happened, <u>why</u> it happened and <u>how</u> to sustain Strengths and reduce Weaknesses.

Background

The AAR is routinely used by states, corporations (GE, British Petroleum, Motorolla). It was developed by the US Army after the four-finger point method of "Performance Critiques", which was negative in tone (and often subjective) created disempowered and fearful soldiers who rarely learned the lessons. Instead the AAR concept was one of the best things that came out of the 70s, except for maybe the Bee Gees. It flattened the largest hierarchical organization in the world: The US Army and made it into a learning organization.

Most Important

The most important thing to get right with an AAR, is **to do one**. Many cadet activities happen without a follow-on discussion of what went right and what did not. We fail in our duties as educators and military personnel if we don't demand an AAR immediately after a training event. It does not need to be complex, time consuming, or negative.

Key Points of an AAR

-Plan It

    --Do One immediately after each event (Schedule it before everyone leaves!!!)

    --Appoint someone to document the discussion and to store the AAR for the next event.

    --Bring Flip Charts.

    --Focus on intended learning objectives or training standards

-Lay the Foundation

    --Start with the Rules of Engagement (ROE)

    Some of my favorites:

        ---One person talking at a time

        ---A sustain for every improve mentioned (Especially if the event was a cluster)

        ---Everyone must say something

        ---No ambushing or embarrassing individuals

    --No lecturing

--If I don't agree, or you don't agree with someone, good. The comment still gets captured.

-Use Time-Sequence debrief to start the AAR

   -The plan / Commander's Intent   (What we intended to Accomplish)

   -Start of the event

   -Middle of the event   (What we actually Accomplished)

   -End of the Event

OR

-Use Subject Area debrief to start the AAR

   -S1, S3, S4, S5, S6,CMD, etc.

   -Planning, Participation, Teamwork, Leadership, etc

-Conduct a "Sustains / Improves" Discussion

   --If it's quiet then I usually start the show by critiquing something I could have done better

   --Manage inappropriate behaviors

      ---The Know-it-all

      ---The Wallflower

      ---The Ambusher

      ---The Contrarian

      ---The I-Love-to-Hear-Myself

   --Encourage Positive behaviors

      --Dignity

      --Respect

      --Understanding

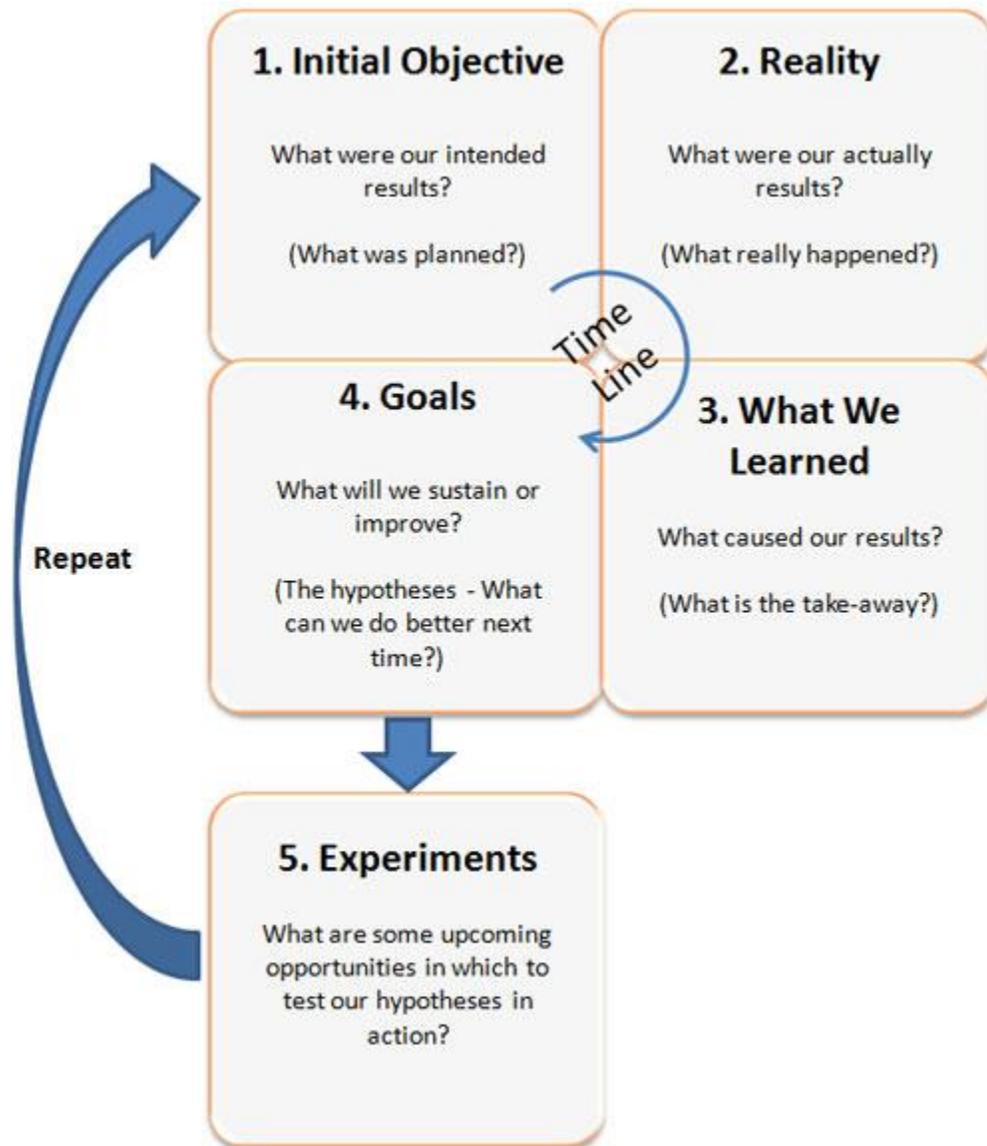   --Transparency

      --Improvement

      --Honesty (Bluntness with limits)

- Conclude on Time

-Ensure AAR gets transcribed and disseminated appropriately

The chart below shows the main parts of the AAR (US Army Combined Arms Center, 2011). In addition, it includes an important final step — turn the lessons learned into learning experiments (Darling, Flanigan, 2008):

References

Darling, M.J., Flanigan, D.C. (2008). What can leaders do? *Learning and Performance Matters*, Kumar, Ramsey (eds.). Singapore: World Scientific Publishing Company.