Conducting an After Action Review (AAR) [1]

What: After Action Reviews (AARs) are based on 4 questions:
1. What did we expect to happen?
2. What actually happened?
3. What went well? Why?
4. What can be improved? How?

Who: They require full participation from all team members, openness in assessing strengths and areas for continuous improvement, and a willingness to sustain best practices and overcome challenges.

When: A team can conduct an AAR midway through a project and again shortly after completing a project.

How Long: Be sure to leave at least 15-30 minutes for a midway AAR – even a brief 15 minute conversation can help your team identify roadblocks and strategies to overcome them. And for a formal project-end AAR, try to allow for 45-60 minutes – this might even include some celebration!

Possible Roles:

Note taker: Assign a team member to take notes. If the AAR is an hour or longer, consider having team members rotate this job so everyone can participate fully.

Timekeeper: Assign times to the sections of the AAR in advance and ask someone to play the role of timekeeper *(this is important - it is easy for groups to get lost in conversation and not have time to cover all sections of the review)*

Ground Rules:

Consider ground rules that you might establish for the AAR (and perhaps most team meetings) such as:

- It is important for everyone to participate
- Everyone's views have equal value
- No blame
- There are no right or wrong answers
- Be open to new ideas
- Be creative in proposing solutions to barriers
- "Yes….and" rather than "either/or" thinking
- Consensus where possible, clarification where not

Question 1: Ask, "What did we expect to happen?"

Start by revisiting the team charter and asking what the team originally planned to do.

Some prompts that may be useful include:
- What was our purpose?
- What were our goals/objectives?
- What facilitators and/or barriers were expected?

Question 2: Ask, "What actually happened?"

Team members need to focus on what happened (the facts) without assessing what was good and what wasn't. This is a question that really benefits from full participation, so that everyone can add their perspective to get the most complete understanding as possible. Try to be specific in your statements and avoid generalizations. And remember, feelings need to be acknowledged in situations where there is frustration or other emotions, but the team's recommendations should be based on their agreed-upon facts.

Question 3: Ask, "What went well? Why?"

Begin with the team's strengths and ask, "What did we do well that helped us achieve our goal?" or "What did we do that had the greatest impact on our success? You could also ask, "What did we enjoy about our working together?" or "What did we do well here that we would like to try in another team?"

The goal here is to both sustain and continue to develop best practices – tools that were used effectively here that can be built into future work. Feel free to use the template on the following page to record your ideas – you might even have each team member do this individually prior to meeting, and then share your listed ideas during the review.

Question 4: Ask, "What can be improved? How?"

This is where the team identifies the obstacles and pitfalls that they experienced. The goal here is to avoid these in the future, and so the team needs to consider determine the root cause for a problem – this might require asking "why?" multiple times until the team has a clear understanding.

You might ask, "What could we have done better?", "What would we do differently next time?" or "What advice do we have to share with future teams engaged in this or a similar project?"

Wrapping the AAR Up

Be sure to summarize the key points identified during your review (see the template below). Completing this AAR is itself an accomplishment, so be sure to end the session reflecting on all of the positive takeaways you have identified that will help either this team or others that you are on in the future!

AFTER ACTION REVIEW TEMPLATE

Team Name: _____ **Date:** _____

When review was completed: ☐ **Midway** ☐ **At End**

NAME	ROLE IN TEAM
	Note taker
	Timekeeper

Question 3: Ask, "What went well? Why?'
(What did we do well that helped us achieve our goal? What did we enjoy about our working together? What did we do well here that we would like to try in another team?)

Successes	How to Ensure Success in the Future

Question 4: **Ask, "What can be improved? How?"** (What could we have done better? What would we do differently next time? What advice do we have to share with future teams engaged in this or a similar project?

What can be improved	Recommendations