

After-Action Review

PREFACE

Successfully managing critical incidents can be complex and demanding. In order to learn from the successes and challenges experienced while managing a critical incident, organizations should conduct a thorough after-action review following each event. To improve individual and collective-task performances that meet or exceed best practices, leaders must know and understand what happened or did not happen during critical incident. After-action reviews (AAR) help provide feedback on process, decision-making, communication, staff support, and task performances in managing critical events to identify and correct deficiencies, sustain strengths, and focus on improved performance.

This guide offers insights to leaders on how to plan, prepare, and conduct an after-action review. Key is the spirit in which AAR is conducted. The environment and climate surrounding an AAR must be one in which the stakeholders and leaders openly and honestly discuss what transpired in sufficient detail and clarity to better understand what did and did not occur and why, and, most importantly, offer the opportunity to learn from and improve management practices.

DEFINITION AND PURPOSE OF AFTER-ACTION REVIEWS

An after-action review is a learning and problem-solving process that enables stakeholders to discover for themselves what happened, why it happened, how to sustain strengths and improve on weaknesses, and adopt a course of action to correct problems. It is a process leaders and managers can apply to get maximum benefit from every critical incident experience.

The effective AAR provides:

- Candid insights into how:
 - Incidents are analyzed
 - Decisions made and communicated
 - Individuals performed
 - Existing systems worked/did not work
- Analysis of incident management strengths and weaknesses (from various perspectives)
- Specific recommendations to improving systems and staff performance

Through an effective AAR, leaders can build on strengths and correct deficiencies by carefully evaluating and comparing overall critical incident management performance against established standards. AAR feedback compares the actual output of a process with the intended outcome. By reflecting on how a critical incident was managed against established standards, and by describing specific observations, AAR participants identify strengths and weaknesses and together decide how to improve overall performance. This shared learning improves management proficiency and promotes team development. Effective AAR may lead to changes in standard procedures, revised duties, improved communications, and focused training.

CONDUCTING AN AFTER-ACTION REVIEW

After-action reviews tend to follow a general format that facilitates the exchange of ideas and observations, and focuses on improving proficiency. Conducting the AAR involves planning, coordination, preparation of training aids, appropriate venue or virtual meeting technology, and support personnel. The AAR should be conducted immediately upon the resolution of a critical event while

being mindful of the psychosocial impact that the event may have had on some stakeholders. In most cases the AAR should commence within 72 hours following a critical incident.

The after-action review:

- Focuses on intended critical incident management objectives
- Considers the efficacy of existing procedures/protocols
- Reflects upon individual actions/performance
- Involves all stakeholders involved in the event
- Uses open-ended questions
- Benchmarks against existing standards
- Determines strengths and weaknesses
- Informs future training
- Recommends revisions to procedures and protocols

The AAR is a continuation of the critical incident management process and should be prioritized as a unique opportunity to improve performance. As such, sufficient time and resources (including individual participation) must be allocated to ensure a robust and productive AAR. The AAR proceeds in four steps as follows:

- Step 1. Planning
- Step 2. Preparing
- Step 3. Conducting
- Step 4. Following up (to AAR recommendations)

Planning

- Select the AAR facilitator (usually neutral and not directly involved in the critical incident under review)
- Identify the AAR objectives
- Fix the date/time of the AAR
- Determine which stakeholders will participate directly (other stakeholders not in attendance may be asked to complete a short survey. See Annex 1 below)
- Select AAR venue (if some or all participants will be calling in, ensure that all technologies are made available and that the facilitator is aware of the virtual participants)
- Choose learning/facilitation aids
- Review the AAR plan

Preparing

- Prepare AAR agenda (based on objectives)
- Identify the applicable benchmarking standards
- Identify key events to observe
- Develop chronology of events
- Gather key documents, communications, notes, emails
- Collate responses of stakeholder surveys
- Visit AAR venue and/or test technology
- Brief facilitator
- Walk through agenda

Conducting

- Review AAR objectives and ground rules
- Encourage full participation
- Maintain focus on AAR objectives
- Stay positive/constructive
- Record recommendations

Follow-up

- Identify next steps based on recommendations (action plan)
- Review/revise existing standards, procedures, protocols in light of review
- Assess leadership/management capacity
- Identify competencies/training to improve performance
- Report to senior management
- Monitor progress against action plan

AAR FACILITATION

The AAR facilitator guides the review using chronology of events to describe and discuss what actually happened. The facilitator should avoid 'yes' or 'no' questions, but encourage participation and guide discussions by using open-ended and leading questions. An open-ended question has no specific answer and allows the person answering to reply based on what was significant to him/her. Open-ended questions are also much less likely to put someone on the defensive. This is more effective in finding out what happened. For example, it is better to ask, "Mr. Johnson, what happened when your program noticed that a person was missing?" rather than, "Mr. Johnson, why didn't you tell HQ that a person was missing?"

As the discussion expands and more participants add their perspectives, what really happened will become clear. Remember, this is not a critique or lecture; the discussion does not about finding fault. However, the facilitator must ensure sensitive issues are explored, even those that may be difficult for some to discuss. Skillful facilitation should ensure the AAR does not gloss over mistakes or weaknesses.

The AAR Facilitator should:

- Establish an atmosphere of trust to encourage open and honest dialogue
- Be specific, avoiding generalizations
- Engage all participants (as appropriate)
- Be thorough in explaining process and desired outcomes
- Not dwell on issues unrelated to incident under discussion
- Insist that participants are propositional
- Note the positive/strengths on which to build
- Seek corrective action for areas of weakness
- Continually summarize/contextualize

Chronology of Events

This technique is logical, structured, and easy to understand. It follows the flow of events from start to finish and allows participants to see the effects of their actions on the events other stakeholders. By covering actions in the order that they occurred, participants are better able to recall what happened. Chronology of events often begins before the onset of the critical incident and should consider activities, decisions, and other exigencies that may have contributed to the incident itself.

Benchmarking Standards

To focus and structure the AAR, the facilitator should present the relevant policies, standards and procedures that the organization has in place that ought to have been applied to the event in question. By focusing on whether and how existing policies, standards and procedures were applied during the event, participants can identify systemic strengths and weaknesses. This technique is particularly useful in revising standards and procedures, and identifying training needs for staff whose duties and responsibilities directly relate to one or more of the actions performed in during the event

In addition to discussing key issues, the AAR facilitator might also explore several optional topics, included in the following paragraphs.

Skills/Competency

Through discussion, the participants may identify critical skills/competencies that affected performance. The facilitator should note these skills/competencies to guide discussions about future training. The facilitator should understand the cultural dynamics of the group and adapt an approach that is likely to foster honest discussion among participants about the relative effectiveness of management and leadership skills/competencies applied in managing the critical event.

Sustain/Improve

The facilitator should note the strengths and proficiencies that are highlighted during discussions. These become the exemplars against which deficiencies can be measured. The intent is to build from strength and then focus on any deficiencies in knowledge, skills or aptitude that need improvement.

CONCLUSION

The AAR report should summarize issues raised and their impact on performance, followed by an analysis of successful application of standards and procedures and specific areas for improvement. This analysis should highlight the demonstrated strengths to be sustained and built upon and describe in some detail the areas in need of improvement. The report should conclude with specific, prioritized recommendations and an action plan that specifies follow-up actions, responsible individual/department, success indicators, and timetable for implementation.

Annex 1

Critical Incident After Action Survey

DATE

Dear _____

You are receiving this request as you have been involved in the recent incident response in [GIVE DETAILS HERE]. Please take the time to answer a few questions below that provide valuable input to improving our critical incident response effectiveness. Your responses will be kept confidential.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

1. Please describe the role you played in the abovementioned incident.
2. From you experience/observations what aspects of the critical incident management worked well? Please be specific.
3. From your experience/observations what aspects of the critical incident management need to be improved? Please be specific.
4. What specific actions do you recommend that will improve performance?

Annex 2
After-Action Review Agenda

	Activity	Notes
1	Introduction of participants	Each participant briefly describes role in the event
2	Ground rules	Honesty, confidentiality, solution-oriented, constructive, propositional, respectful, etc.
3	Review of AAR objectives	
4	Review Benchmarking Standards	Contingency plan, incident management plan, SOP (What was supposed to happen?)
5	Chronology of events	Day-by-day events, decision, and actions supported by selected documentation to summarize and remind participants of key moments. (What actually happened?)
6	Plus - Delta	What worked well? What should be done differently (next time)? Explore the strengths and weaknesses of systems and functions. This session should have adequate time and active facilitation.
7	Recommendations	What specific changes need to be made to improve performance? Build on strengths.
8	Follow-up actions	What actions need to be taken? By whom? When?
9	Closing comments/summary	Focus on process and outcomes. Review action plan. Stay positive.