



AIA Best Practices: After action reviews

Using lessons learned to help fuel continuous improvement

Contributed by Donald C. Simpson, AIA

Summary

One of the greatest learning opportunities for architecture firms is the pedagogical component of executing the work; what we learn from our successes and failures. Firms that can capitalize on these learning opportunities can develop best practices, increase their expertise, and lower their risk exposure. The after action review (AAR) is a tool that can help facilitate this process on a project-by-project basis.

1. Concept—What AARs are.

An AAR is a review of a project or internal company process that allows employees to learn what happened and why, both good and bad. (AARs are not new, but the term is. The somewhat grimmer “postmortem” has often been used to describe similar activities.) AARs are also used to solicit ideas on how the project or activity could have been done better. It is a professional discussion that includes all key participants and focuses on improving processes, not affixing blame. In this regard, an AAR aligns well with a continuous improvement culture.

2. What AARs are not.

ARs are not critiques; rather, they are professional discussions of what occurred during projects or internal company activities or processes. AAR leaders do not lecture participants on what went wrong. They use AARs to tell a story about what was planned; what actually happened; why it happened; and what could have been done differently and what went well and should be continued.

3. General process.

AAR leaders guide discussions to bring out important learning points, preferably by the employees themselves. Employees learn much more when they identify for themselves what went right and wrong than when lessons are dictated. Therefore, AARs require preparation to be useful. Someone, generally the project manager (PM), should be prepared to introduce the process and describe what happened with the project (scope, budget, contractual requirements, key players involved, timeline, and outcomes). Each of the key AAR participants then presents three “sustain” items (things we should continue doing) and three “improve”

items (things we could have done better). An agenda for a typical project involving several technical disciplines might be as follows:

- Introduction by group manager (if needed)
- Overview of project by project manager
 - - - Scope & budget (before and after)
 - - - Client & contractual requirements
 - - - Key players
 - - - Timeline
 - - - Key events (what happened)
- “Sustain” and “improve” presentations by key participants
 - - - Various project team representatives
 - - - Key corporate representatives
 - - - Client or end-user representative (when appropriate)
- Group discussion (facilitated by group manager or PM, aided by note-taker)
- Initial conclusions and recommendations
 - - - What *really* happened?
 - - - What do we continue to do?
 - - - What do we change? How?

4. Follow-up.

The product of a good AAR should be some identifiable lessons learned that can be incorporated into how we do business. The group manager responsible for an AAR should ensure that a short memo is developed that captures the key take-aways (primarily the conclusions and recommendations). This memo should then be disseminated throughout the company and possibly posted to an AAR intranet website or a folder on a shared drive for future reference.

5. Conclusion.

Continuous improvement occurs in “learning organizations,” those companies that have a culture that encourages open, honest dialogue with a shared goal of improving the organization as a whole. The AAR is a tool that can help facilitate this process on a project-by-project basis.

Footnotes

How to create and use an after-action report [+ Template] <https://www.alertmedia.com/blog/after-action-report/>, Accessed 15 August 2023

About the contributor

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