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Conducting After-Action Reviews and Retrospects

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Abstract
{Excerpt} After-action reviews are a leadership and knowledge-sharing tool which bring together the team that is closest to the activity or project, when a critical milestone has been reached, to discuss successes and failures in an open and honest fashion. The purpose is to learn from the experience and take the lessons learned into the next phase of the activity or project, or to accomplish related tasks more effectively the next time a similar activity or project is conducted. After-action reviews and retrospects are linked conceptually. The difference lies in the degree of detail and the formality applied to the process of conducting them.

Exit interviews are a way to capture knowledge from leavers. Peer assists are about teams asking for help for the benefit of their members. They are about "learning before doing." But continuously assessing organizational performance to meetor exceed expectations requires also that one obtain feedback and understand what happened (or did not happen) during an activity or project, or soon after completion. After-action reviews are about "learning while doing:" they identify how to correct shortcomings and sustain accomplishments. Retrospects are about "learning after doing:" they capture the new knowledge acquired after the fact. In both instances, knowledge gleaned from and compiled by those closest to the review can be used to improve results and can be shared with others who are planning, developing, implementing, and evaluating similar efforts.

Keywords
Asian Development Bank, ADB, poverty, economic growth, sustainability, development

Comments

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Organizational learning calls for nonstop assessment of performance—its successes and failures. This makes sure that learning takes place and supports continuous improvement. After-action reviews and retrospects are a tool that facilitates assessments; they enable this by bringing together a team to discuss an activity or project openly and honestly.

Rationale

Exit interviews are a way to capture knowledge from leavers. Peer assists are about teams asking for help for the benefit of their members. They are about "learning before doing." But continuously assessing organizational performance to meet or exceed expectations requires also that one obtain feedback and understand what happened (or did not happen) during an activity or project, or soon after completion. After-action reviews are about "learning while doing:" they identify how to correct shortcomings and sustain accomplishments. Retrospects are about "learning after doing:" they capture the new knowledge acquired after the fact.[11] In both instances, knowledge gleaned from and compiled by those closest to the review can be used to improve results and can be shared with others who are planning, developing, implementing, and evaluating similar efforts.

Definition

After-action reviews are a leadership and knowledge-sharing tool which bring together the team that is closest to the activity or project, when a critical milestone has been reached, to discuss successes and failures in an open and honest fashion. The purpose is to learn from the experience and take the lessons learned into the next phase of the activity or project, or to accomplish related tasks more effectively the next time a similar activity or project is conducted. After-action reviews and retrospects are linked conceptually. The difference lies in the degree of detail and the formality applied to the process of conducting them.

Benefits

When administered in a climate of openness, candid discussion, clarity, and commitment to identifying and recommending solutions, after-action reviews and retrospects yield many benefits. The participants in the review, e.g., managers, leaders, and those planning to pursue a similar activity or project in the future, will understand more clearly what was originally intended, what transpired and why, as well as what might be done better and

1 After-action reviews and retrospects are not audits. The latter are often evaluative or conducted for purposes of accountability. The former aim to turn knowledge into action, not to make judgments.

how. The number of subsequent repeats of mistakes or missteps will decrease. Furthermore, reports from after-action reviews and retrospects that make concrete and actionable recommendations will increase the chances of success of similar activities or projects. Lastly, the promotion of open and frequent communication and sharing and the institutionalization of regularly-held meetings that examine strengths to sustain and shortcomings to remedy will also improve morale.

Process

The focus of an after-action review is to answer three broad questions: What did we set out to do? What worked well, and why? What might we do differently next time, and how? However, there are many ways to tackle these questions: the desired simplicity at the heart of after-action reviews and retrospects means that there is potential to experiment and find ways that will work best with the activity or project examined and the team involved in these. Be it for after-action reviews or retrospects, the process should be kept simple and easy to remember. Box 1 elaborates on the purpose of the principal questions to ask. Box 2 itemizes the steps of planning, preparing, conducting, and following up on an after-action review.

Box 1: After-Action Review Questions

Question	Purpose
What was supposed to happen? What actually happened? Why were there differences?	These questions establish a common under-standing of the work item under review. The facilitator should encourage and promote discussion around these questions. In particular, divergences from the plan should be explored.
What worked? What didn't? Why?	These questions generate reflection about the successes and failures during the course of the project, activity, event, or task. The question "Why?" generates understanding of the root causes of these successes and failures.
What would you do differently next time?	This question is intended to help identify specific actionable recommendations. The facilitator asks the team members for crisp and clear, achievable, and future-oriented recommendations.

Source: Overseas Development Institute. 2008. *After-Action Reviews and Retrospects*. Available: www.odi.org.uk/rapid/tools/toolkits/km/aar.html

The Overseas Development Institute explains that the questions posed for a retrospect follow the after-action review format but involve asking the following more detailed questions:

- What did you set out to achieve?
- What was your plan to achieve this?
- How did this change as you progressed?
- What went well and why?
- What could have gone better?
- What advice would you give yourself if you were to go back to where you were at the start of the activity or project?
- What were the two or three key lessons you would share with others?
- What's next for you in terms of this project?
- Can you think of a story that summarizes your experience of work on this activity or project?
- What should we have learned from this activity or project a year from now?
- Are there any lessons for you personally?

Box 2: The After-Action Review Process

Planning the After-Action Review

- Identify an event or activity to be reviewed.
- Identify the primary point of contact for the review.
- Determine when the after-action review will occur.
- Decide who will attend the after-action review.
- Select when and where the after-action review will take place. Plan for no more than 90 minutes.[1]
- Confirm who will support the after-action review, e.g., technical lead, champion, point of contact, minute taker.

Preparing for the After-Action Review

- Select a facilitator.
- Confirm the venue and agenda.
- Obtain inputs from interested parties.
- Announce the after-action review and compile the list of attendees.
- Make logistical arrangements and set up the venue.

Conducting the After-Action Review

- Seek maximum participation.
- Maintain focus on a positive and informative after-action review.
- Ensure honest, candid, and professional dialogue.
- Record key points.

Following Up: Using the Results of the After-Action Review

- Determine actionable recommendations that will improve the process.
- Identify tasks requiring senior leadership decisions.
- Determine a follow up schedule and point of contact for each follow-up action.
- Provide assistance and support as required.

[1] An after-action review might last as little as 20 minutes.

Note: This publication details the four steps in the after-action review process. It provides checklists for the planning and conduct of after-action reviews and for their logistical arrangements and setup. It also offers ground rules for facilitators.

Source: U.S. Agency for International Development. 2006. *After-Action Review: Technical Guidance*. Washington. Available: http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/pnadf360.pdf

Others

After-action reviews and retrospects are not critique or complaint sessions. They are intended to maximize experience by allowing everyone to learn from each other. They are not a full-scale evaluation. And, they are not a cure for all problems. After-action reviews are successful when leaders support them, they are done immediately—by the team and for the team, and participants agree to be honest.

For further information

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Knowledge Solutions

Asian Development Bank

ADB, based in Manila, is dedicated to reducing poverty in the Asia and Pacific region through inclusive economic growth, environmentally sustainable growth, and regional integration. Established in 1966, it is owned by 67 members—48 from the region. In 2007, it approved $10.1 billion of loans, $673 million of grant projects, and technical assistance amounting to $243 million.

Knowledge Solutions are handy, quick reference guides to tools, methods, and approaches that propel development forward and enhance its effects. They are offered as resources to ADB staff. They may also appeal to the development community and people having interest in knowledge and learning.

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