

# Positive Change in Action

## How to Build Trust and Expertise with After Action Reviews

BY JAKE MAZULEWICZ

**D**o you lead your team to learn primarily from successes or from failures? Many leaders argue that their teams are just too busy to spend time discussing why a successful project went well. They just wrap up quickly and then dive into the next project.

So, the unspoken insights and unwritten lessons learned from that project rarely get shared or discussed. Often, they just get forgotten in the frenzy of working on project after project.

Would you hire an engineer to build you a bridge if all that engineer ever studied was how bridges collapse? Would you hire a recruiter to find you a job if all that recruiter ever studied was how people get fired?

The best leaders help their teams learn regularly from their successes, not just occasionally from their failures.

But learning from success happens automatically—doesn't it?

### AFTER ACTION REVIEW

Soldiers perform complex, dynamic, and often dangerous missions, and they want to learn as much as they can from each one. In the 1980s, leaders in the U.S. Army realized that they needed a practical way to help soldiers share the unspoken insights and unwritten lessons they learned from their missions. They realized that sharing tribal knowledge and applying tacit skill were key to winning wars. And since it was the Army, they developed a process—a non-punitive, semi-structured, post-job team debrief called an after action review (AAR).

After action reviews have proven so wildly effective that every branch of the military now uses them. And for some units like flight crews and special operations forces, AARs are almost a religion. They've been called “one of the most successful organizational learning methods yet devised.”

The process of leading a basic AAR is simple. Soon after your team completes

a project, gather them in a private space for about 30 minutes, and ask these four questions:

1. What did we set out to do?
2. What did we actually do?
3. How did it turn out the way it did?
4. What will we do differently next time?

### WHY USE THESE QUESTIONS?

Have you ever had a discussion degenerate into a fact-free “war of opinions?” That's the fate you'll suffer if you start a debrief by asking for opinions. True, questions three and four are subjective, and do indeed ask for opinions. But notice that questions one and two are much more fact-based. It may seem silly to ask, “What did we intend to do in this job?” But different people have different goals for the same job. The accountant on your team may have intended to maximize revenue. The safety specialist on your team may have intended to reduce the risk



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of injuries. The team leader may have wanted to finish the job ahead of schedule and under budget. So always start your after action reviews by getting facts with questions one and two before getting opinions with questions three and four.

“What went well, and what went badly?” This may seem like a great question for a debrief. After all, it cuts straight to the point, right? Here’s the problem. This question nudges us to discuss blame, not improvements. And blame stops learning in its tracks. Look at the four after action review questions. There’s no hint of fault, failure, or blame in any of them. That’s intentional. After action reviews focus on learning, not blame. Make sure you keep that focus in every AAR you lead.

Soldiers are fond of sayings like “no mission plan ever survives contact with reality” or “the planning is more valuable than the plan.” And in reality, the percentage of complex missions that go exactly according to plan is nearly zero percent. Soldiers and other experts in complex, dynamic systems know that

in any given job, there’s always a gap between what we plan to do and what we actually do. Notice how question one asks about the plan. Some call this “work as imagined.” Question two asks about the actual job; some call this “work as done.” When you lead your after action reviews, use questions one and two to explore this critical gap, but not eliminate it.

### THREE COMMON MISTAKES AND HOW TO AVOID THEM

#### 1. Successes versus failures

Some leaders do AARs only for accidents or errors. If you do that, your team will quickly associate AARs with failure. And they’ll give short, vague answers to get it over with as fast as possible. So, lead about 80 percent or more of your AARs for successful projects. That way, your team will learn to trust the process and value the results.

#### 2. Now versus later

Unspoken insights and lessons learned are the most valuable things a team can

discuss in an after action review. Those unspoken ideas have a half-life of hours or less. So, if you wait a day or more to lead your AAR, much of the priceless, unspoken wisdom will already have been lost, perhaps forever. So, lead the AAR as soon as the project wraps.

#### 3. Leader versus facilitator

Most leaders like to answer questions, and that’s usually a good thing—but not in an after action review. If you give in to the temptation to answer the questions, you’ll shut your team down until the only person talking is you. So, in an after action review, remember that the leader is the person who talks the least. Choose your AAR leaders accordingly.

If you want a low-cost, low-risk way to build trust and expertise on your team, you will likely never find a more practical method than leading after action reviews.

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