



FACT SHEET:

After Action Reviews and the Action Review Cycle™ (ARC)

Raise the bar on performance and learning using After Action Reviews (AARs)

What does it take to consistently excel across your organization, when the rules keep changing?

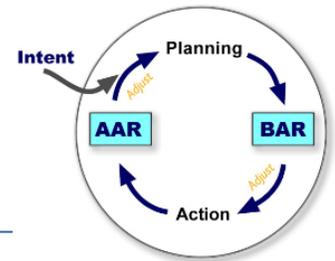
Traditional models of leadership, learning and execution assume a stable environment. But in a complex, dynamic environment, you can't write the rulebook fast enough. When the rules start to change, traditional models fall short.

After Action Reviews are a powerful way to build knowledge and capability.

But...AARs are *not* about holding big post-project meetings where every nugget of knowledge gets captured for future use. AARs are about leaders and their teams taking responsibility to improve results over time by using their real work as the "textbook" from which they learn about how to perform, even when the rules keep changing from day to day; from project to project.

Short cycles of planning, preparing, acting and reflecting, with a focus on

linking yesterday's lessons to tomorrow's planning, is what transforms the AAR from a one-time event to a source for sustainable competitive advantage.



The Action Review Cycle

Too often, the AAR is treated as a stand-alone tool for capturing lessons learned at the end of a project.

"After Action Review" is a misnomer. In its best practice, the AAR is part of an Action Review Cycle™ or "ARC" of improvement that starts before action with a learning-rich planning and preparation process. That sets the stage to use AARs to produce true learning, rather than simple fixes.

The U.S. Army's After Action Review has evolved over two decades of use to include a rich and powerful structure and process for planning and preparation, which acts as a "bookend" to the AAR that follows. Signet helps organizations learn from and adapt the entire Action Review Cycle to fit effectively into their business environment.

Before and After Action Reviews

A simple starting point for enriching an AAR practice is to add a Before Action Review (BAR) that mirrors the questions asked in an AAR. Not only does the BAR help a team clearly state their intention just before taking action, but also adds the discipline of predicting challenges and, most important, drawing on lessons learned from past action.

Before Action Review

What are our intended results and measures?

What challenges can we anticipate?

What have we/others learned from similar situations?

What will make us successful this time?



After Action Review

What were our intended results?

What were our actual results?

What caused our results?

What will we sustain? Improve?

Preparation

Teams can take the process a step further by literally "rehearsing": walking through their plan to check for mutual understanding of each person's role at key moments, and points in time where coordination is critical. Where have projects or events or meetings like this broken down in the past? How can the whole team be prepared to recognize early warning signs and act in concert to avoid repeating past mistakes?

Non-Negotiables

- Lessons must benefit the team itself.
- Learning begins at the beginning, not after the fact.
- A key leadership role: linking lessons to the future.
- Leaders must hold everyone, including themselves, accountable for learning.

"In a complex environment, the first answer is probably incomplete. You have to work at a problem, action by action, to come up with a complete solution."

— COL Joe Moore

AAR “Incubators”

Find a place to start.

By focusing your early efforts on a few big challenges or opportunities, you can demonstrate to everyone involved that the value of a disciplined Action Review Cycle exceeds the effort invested.

Some places to start:

Operational Performance Management

Improve performance against key targets.
Reduce the impact of external events.

Emergency Response

Avoid similar emergencies in the future.
Improve the speed and quality of response and damage control. Improve long-term effectiveness of solutions.

Operational Shutdowns

Reduce the cost and scheduled downtime. Minimize adverse impact on customers.

Product Development

Improve quality, reduce cost and schedule (concept to customer).
Anticipate changing customer expectations.

Product Launches

Achieve 100% of quality standard on Job One. Apply lessons from one site to improve performance at the next site during launch roll out.

Entering a New Business or Market

Apply lessons from past successes and failures to improve results on new ventures.

Sales

Improve the win/loss ratio. Refine the value proposition for a new product.

Mergers and Acquisitions

Ensure that transactions deliver promised value to stakeholders.

*From “Learning in the Thick of It,” Darling, Parry and Moore, **Harvard Business Review**, July/August 2005.*

AAR Do’s and Don’ts

Do:

- Start by using AARs to tackle a specific business challenge.
- Break projects into smaller chunks and do AARs in small task-focused groups as you go.
- Make sure the time invested in each AAR produces enough benefit to turn it into a sustainable practice.
- Prepare: The more data you bring to the meeting, the more time the team has to build useful insights

Don’t:

- Don’t allow AARs to turn into a “check-the-box” exercise
- Don’t over-rely on outside facilitators to hold AARs...learn how to facilitate them yourselves
- Don’t use AARs to pin blame on individuals for “failures”
- Don’t fail to follow through...the true value of an AAR is what changes as a result

Signet can help:

- *Improve team performance and learning by helping build AARs into their work*
- *Train a support network of coaches and facilitators skilled in all parts of the Action Review Cycle*
- *Coach leaders on how to help their teams learn from failure, navigate AAR pitfalls, and use AARs to tackle tough problems and cultural change*
- *Use AARs as a front-end to create and share knowledge across the enterprise*

Signet Research & Consulting, LLC

Signet Research & Consulting was founded in 1989 to conduct research focused on organizations that have built the capacity to learn how to learn, and to provide consulting based on that research.

Two major products of Signet’s research over the past ten years include Emergent Learning and EL Maps™ to support learning and growing know-how across teams, and After Action Reviews to build accountability and agility in execution.

Our mission is to help organizations accelerate results today and build their

adaptive capacity for tomorrow. Our goal is to help our clients bring everyone’s intelligence and resourcefulness to the table.

We help leaders develop a rich understanding of their organization’s adaptive capacity. We guide leaders and their teams in charting a path that fits their culture and mission, taking advantage of what is already in place and borrowing from what other organizations have learned.

Such transitions rarely occur overnight—they evolve over time

through clear intention and deliberate experimentation.

We support these transitions from vision through execution with design, consultation, training, facilitation and coaching services.

For more information on Signet’s research and consulting services, please visit us on the web at

www.signetconsulting.com.