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COVER STORY

## Online Extra: Learning on the Front Lines

How an Army process for acquiring knowledge from mistakes can help companies learn from their own

In 2004, DTE Energy ([DTE](#)) wasn't exactly known for speedy service. The Detroit-based power company took 230 minutes to restore power after an outage—among the highest in an industry where the average hovers around 120 minutes. "We kept wanting to attack [the problem] through this silver bullet eureka moment," says DTE's Director of Resource Management Shawn Patterson. "We ran study after study and had all these big initiatives."

DTE quickly learned their attempts weren't going to make any sustained improvements. "We didn't have in place any kind of learning practice for how we could get better at restoration," says Patterson. Rather, when power failures occurred, paperwork ensued. System supervisors filled out administrative forms that never got at the root of the problem.

Then in late 2004, the utility began applying a process its CEO learned from the U.S. Army. Tony Early had visited Fort Irwin, the Army's National Training Center in the Mojave Desert in southern California, where it pits soldiers against a resident "opposing force," which plays the enemy. During and after these mock battles, the Army uses a process called the after-action review to learn from its mistakes. Soldiers then take the process to real battlefields to make sure lessons are captured in the heat of fire.

**APPROVING "AFTER-ACTION."** At Fort Irwin, DTE's Early says, "They have everything from these big elaborate computers where they can recreate the whole battle to very informal discussions that get down on a micro scale to half a dozen problems," he says. "It was a fascinating process, and we started to develop it as a tool. It really caught on like wildfire."

In its simplest form, an after-action review, which a number of companies, from Harley-Davidson ([HDI](#)) to Green Mountain Coffee Roasters ([GMCR](#)), have adopted for corporate use, is a structured discussion. Whether informal or formal, it tries to answer four questions: What did we set out to do? What happened? Why did it happen? What are we going to do about it?

The Army suggests that 25% of the time allocated for the review be spent on the first two questions, 25% on the third, and 50% on the fourth. In some cases, the reviews will be impromptu sit-downs in the field, sometimes called a "hot wash." At the other extreme, an entire battalion might gather in a high-tech room to answer the questions with the help of sophisticated equipment.

**SAFE ENVIRONMENT.** The process originated at the Army's National Training Center, says Colonel David Hogg, a senior trainer at the center and commander of its Operations Group. "It was one of those things that started in the early '80s to allow us to examine ourselves, to come to grips with how to make it better, and to eliminate the perception of zero defects," says Hogg. The review process was part of a larger transformation for the Army at the time, away from leadership that often punished mistakes with demotion to one that saw them as learning opportunities. Now, says Hogg, "the process is incorporated into our Army psyche."

To make the process work, says Hogg, it's essential for commanders to create an environment that's safe for candid discussion. Open-ended questions are key, as are stories from leaders who share their own mistakes. Hogg also likes to use humor as a tool, and he frequently shows video clips from commercials or movies to drive home a point.

When done right, the reviews aren't a static postmortem event, says Marilyn Darling, founder of Signet Consulting, which works with corporations that are adopting the process. Darling, along with partner Charles Parry and retired Colonel Joseph A. Moore Jr., a former commander at the NTC, emphasize that the review process should become part of the cultural fabric of an organization. "What you want to be doing is building the muscle of teams and leaders so that they'll be learning in real time," says Parry.

**USEFUL OBSERVATIONS.** One way to do that, Darling suggests, is not to worry about documenting everything when first starting to conduct reviews. "That helps to escape the 'report' mentality," she says. It also helps to encourage participants to test insights before they become doctrine or standard practice.

Darling and Parry brought DTE's Early to the NTC, and they have helped the utility implement the process throughout the company. Employees seem to have embraced it: During the 2003 blackout that shut down power across much of the Northern U.S., CEO Early was happy to see dozens of his employees writing down their observations, telling him "I'm just taking some notes for my after-action review." DTE held dozens of reviews after the blackout to look at how its response could have been better.

Has the utility improved? DTE's restoration time for day-to-day power failures is about 140 minutes, a 40% improvement. Now, DTE gathers both field and operations center workers in one place for biweekly meetings to discuss power failures and their root causes. "What I really got out of the [Army's process] is that when they're doing their battle sessions, they can't comprehend every scenario," says Patterson. "It comes down to how every team comes together, and how that team of people works together."

By Jena McGregor

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