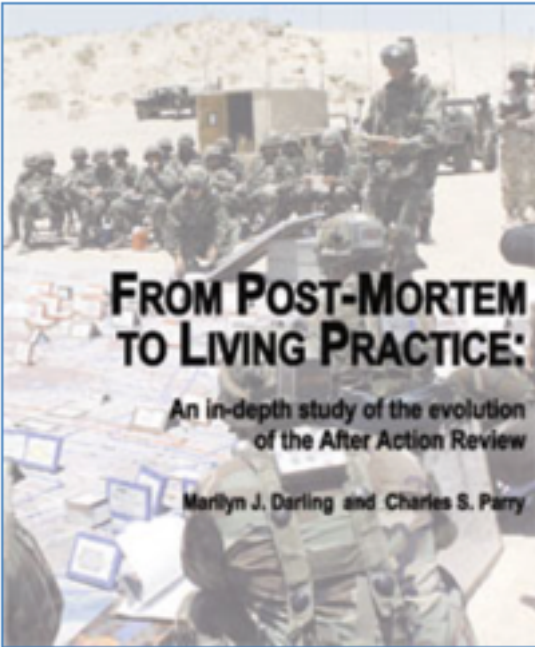


From Post-Mortem to Living Practice

An in-depth study of the evolution of the After Action Review



"The Army's After Action Review (AAR) is arguably one of the most successful organizational learning methods yet devised. Yet, most every corporate effort to graft this truly innovative practices into their culture has failed because, again and again, people reduce the living practice to a sterile technique.

As Marilyn Darling and Charles Parry show, the crucial difference lies in the synergy between culture and method. For the Army, AAR's enable people to work together to create results they truly desire, rather than being another way to force people to do post mortems. Darling's and Parry's study can help corporate leaders at all levels grasp the essence of the AAR, so they can help it incubate in their own culture."

– Peter Senge

"...an exhaustive examination of the role of the After Action Review (AAR) in the U.S. Army's organizational learning strategy. While many have written about the AAR, no other authors have uncovered the dynamics of the process as have Marilyn Darling and Charles Parry. Indeed their study may provide a source for method improvement as the Army goes through an historic transformation from a Cold War force to one structured to meet the challenges of asymmetric conflict".

– COL John O'Shea

Executive Summary

The decade past has seen some pretty significant performance gains, particularly in the corporate sector. Some organizations made fundamental shifts in how they conduct business; some got there by simply picking the low hanging fruit. But what's next? How can organizations sustain this level of performance gains in the decade to come?

A number of civilian organizations have begun to experiment with the U.S. Army's After Action Review (AAR). The AAR appears to be fairly straightforward and has accumulated an impressive record of success in sustaining and improving performance at multiple levels of one very large organization, and succeeded in making the jump from one leader's initiative to being part of the organization's cultural fabric. In today's Army, AARs are seen as simply a normal part of how they do things.

The Signet study takes an in-depth look at how the practice has evolved over the past 20 years in the U.S. Army, and at the experiences - both successes and failures - of early adopters in the civilian sector.

One of the key findings is that the AAR, at its best in either military and civilian settings, is seen as an ongoing practice - a disciplined approach to improving performance over time - and not as an event or a tool. Civilian organizations must learn to distinguish the practice from the traditional concepts of "retrospectives" or "post-mortems."

A well-structured AAR practice helps institutionalize performance improvement and capture knowledge as a way of doing business. The AAR meeting itself inserts a punctuation mark into the blur of everyday activities, and provides a discipline to help teams distill, capture and apply what they are learning as they complete their work.

A practice does not need to be complex, nor should it take a great deal of time and effort to implement. As the study describes, however, there are some essential elements to creating an AAR practice that will produce long-term performance improvement and knowledge gains comparable to those achieved by the U.S. Army.

Signet's bottom-line recommendation is that leaders who want to use the AAR should focus on structuring a complete practice that fits their organization rather than on trying to use the technique as a meeting to diagnose a failure. Over time, an AAR practice will create a culture where people naturally ask, "What did we learn this time? And when and how will we apply it?"

Preview: Some Corporate Adaptations of the AAR

Improving an annual planning process at Shell A business planning team for Shell's exploration business meets midway through the annual planning process to review what has worked and hasn't to date. They then hold a "Before Action Review" to look forward to what the "ground truth" of the next phase might hold and plan the next AAR meeting at completion to take lessons learned into next year's process.

Preparing for new model introductions at Harley-Davidson The Kansas City manufacturing team uses AARs to prepare for new product launches. The team conducts three pre-builds: starting with planning, they test their assumptions in the production setting, conduct an AAR, adjust their planning assumptions and performance standards and do it again, until they are confident that they can perform to standard for the first full production run.

Creating a learning discipline in operations at Geerlings & Wade The operations manager conducts AARs by teleconference on a quarterly basis to review key events in the warehouse operations over the quarter, paired with 10-minute "spot AARs" conducted one-on-one with warehouse managers to capture lessons and innovations as they occur. This on-going practice "raises the bar" for their performance and helps them build a body of operational knowledge.

Links To purchase a copy of the 40 page study, or for a one-page handout on the features and benefits of an AAR practice in a corporate environment, go to SignetConsulting.com.

Getting Help Signet can help your team or business unit build or improve their own AAR practice. We provide presentations, consultation, facilitation, training and coaching as needed. Please contact us at AARstudy@SignetConsulting.com