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Don't Skimp On The After Action Review: 6 Ways An AAR Will Catapult Your Situational Awareness

Jeff Boss

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If your company or team isn't applying an after action review (AAR) because doing so "takes too much time;" if you're caught up in the complacency of success or otherwise applying yesterday's successes and expecting (read *hoping*) them to work today, don't worry. You'll soon be able to forget about all the hard work that goes into learning and staying relative and instead be able to ask your competitors how *they've* won, because *they are* learning and *they will* be the ones who benefit from consistent, organizational learning.

If this sarcasm doesn't sit well with you, then that's a good thing. Even better, [if falling behind the "relevancy curve" is less than ideal then consider looking rearward to move forward through the after action review](#) . Here's what I mean.

In the military we conducted an after action review after every major training evolution and every mission with the goal being to capture and share knowledge from every participant's perspective at every level. After all, if I know what my senior leader was thinking at so-and-so stage in the game then his knowledge will inform my decision making next time a similar situation occurs, and free him up to focus on what only he can effect, which benefits the team and the mission.

Here are six more reasons why an after action review is a must for

staying relevant:

1. After action reviews help you think better.

While execution is important, it doesn't matter what you're doing if your behaviors are wrong. An after action review allows you to *think* better because their purpose is to question any and all previously held assumptions and beliefs, inciting greater curiosity. There are three questions to ask when conducting an after action review:

1. What was expected to happen?
2. What actually happened?
3. What caused the difference? (between one and two above)

[Thinking leads to doing, and smart thinking leads to smart execution.](#)

2. After action reviews build shared contextual awareness.

One of the main challenges organizations face today is the silo effect, which is the division of functional areas into their own respective "silos." The ongoing challenge is a lack of clear and consistent communication up, down and across these silos that align with corporate definition's of success (oftentimes because corporate hasn't defined what *success* looks like). Most of the time, leaders and managers expect that any conclusions derived from a project or task are conveyed to the broader team and then adopted into a best practice that turns into an enterprise standard. The truth is, this rarely happens--if ever--because there's no formal process for doing so. The result is myriad different business functions running in their own directions chasing their *own* definitions of success.

Here's where an after action review helps. By proactively sharing knowledge up, down and across the organization *consistently*, you not only build greater trust throughout but each silo also learns about each other's wins, losses and intentions, which means they can also strategically plan two things: 1) how to improve and 2) how to improve *as one*.

3. After action reviews help sustain competitive advantage.

[Employees leave their jobs roughly every four years](#) which means when they depart they take their tacit knowledge and experience with them, leaving it up to the person behind them to begin learning anew.

When a new hire comes on board—experienced or not—they're essentially starting at ground zero, and the ramp up time required for he or she to “be ready” is not only a sunk cost but an emotional cost, as well. The stress of trying to learn as much as possible and as fast as possible is the typical expectation but it's not even feasible.

What an after action review does is provide a go-to knowledge bank replete with tacit knowledge that can't be gleaned from an org chart (do those still exist?) or filled with the typical bias that accompanies a single sourced conversation. The byproduct is a knowledge pool that allows newbies to read in between the lines that they wouldn't receive otherwise .

4. After action reviews spark creativity.

An after action review provides new employees a collective source of information to which they can refer, and having a knowledge bank of reviews allows you to get a fresh set of eyes on an old problem. This is another way of affirming Einstein (as if he needs affirmation) when he said, “We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them.”

5. After action reviews enable decision making.

Intuitive decision making stems from the brain's ability to see patterns. The faster you recognize patterns, the sooner you come to a conclusion. Just think of that incredibly annoying guy (or gal) you bump into in the hallway every day. You probably do everything possible to avoid this person because your brain recognizes that you're about to embark upon five minutes of your life that you'll never get back, not to mention an increase in heart palpitations which does nothing to help your stress levels.

Now, while this is a ridiculous example, you get the idea. The same holds true for recognizing the distance needed to stop when

following behind another driver. The point is, the context and awareness gleaned from an after action review helps build pattern recognition which, in turn, heightens risk perception and ultimately decision making.

6. After action reviews minimize interpretation.

Clarity of message is one of the single greatest sources of organizational chaos. When there's ambiguity you have bias and personal interpretations that serve individual agendas. With clarity, however, you have a well-oiled machine; you can execute seamlessly and flawlessly throughout the organization because the organization itself is [fit to perform](#). There isn't much to wonder about when messaging is clear--when *lessons* are understood--which is exactly one of the benefits that AARs provide: clarity in learning. When learning lessons are clear, there's more time to focus on being productive *about* work rather than being busy trying to figure out *how* to work.

[After action reviews are a must--read must--to organizational learning. If you're not constantly learning, you're already behind the curve.](#)