Appendix K
After Action Reviews

OVERVIEW

K-1. An after action review (AAR) is a guided analysis of a Soldier's or organization's performance, conducted at appropriate times during and at the conclusion of a training event or operation with the objective of improving future performance. It includes a facilitator, event participants, and other observers. AARs are conducted at every echelon and are essential in correcting observed training deficiencies by providing feedback that is immediate, direct, and standards based.

K-2. AARs are a professional discussion requiring the participation of those trained. AARs enable and encourage participants to self-discover what happened then develop a plan for improving task performance. AARs focus on the commander's intent, guidance, training objectives, and task standards. They are not a critique, and leaders avoid creating an environment of pointing out failures. The climate of the AAR must encourage candid and open discussion of task performance without stifling learning and team building by—
- Emphasizing meeting the Army standard on tasks rather than judging success or failure.
- Using leading questions to encourage self-discovery and important lessons.
- Allowing a large number of Soldiers and leaders—including opposing forces (OPFORs)—to participate so more lessons are shared.
- Assigning leader responsibility to improve task performance.

K-3. AARs also signal the start of the next planning cycle. Lessons learned from the review of performance provide leaders the specifics of what and how to perform better for future training. The AAR process ensures participants self-discover what went right, what went wrong, and how to perform to standard next time. Leaders capture AAR results to craft better, more effective training plans and execution. AARs also help leaders frame the unit's retraining efforts. To the greatest extent, training is not complete until all training objectives are met. When this is not possible, leaders ensure retraining is planned and executed as expeditiously as possible.

K-4. AARs can be either formal or informal. A formal AAR is resource-intensive and involves planning for and preparing the AAR site, supporting training aids, and supporting personnel. Informal AARs require far less planning and preparation, and they can and should be conducted when unit performance requires it. (See the Army Training Network (ATN) at https://atn.army.mil for more on AARs.)

FUNDAMENTALS OF TRAINING AFTER ACTION REVIEW

K-5. AARs have the following fundamental characteristics. They—
- Are conducted during or immediately after each event.
- Focus on commander's intent, guidance, training objectives, and task standards.
- Involve all participants in the discussion.
- Use open-ended questions.
- Encourage initiative and innovation.
- Determine observed strengths and weaknesses.
- Link performance to subsequent training.

AGENDA FOR TRAINING AFTER ACTION REVIEW

K-6. AARs follow an agenda, which includes—

- A review of what was supposed to happen.
- Establishing what did happen.
- Determining what was right or wrong with what happened.
- Determining how to perform the task to standard next time.

K-7. A training AAR begins with a review of what was supposed to happen. A facilitator or evaluator, along with participants, reviews what was supposed to happen. This review is based on the commander's guidance, training objectives, and tasks to train.

K-8. The training AAR continues as the evaluator establishes what happened. The facilitator and participants jointly determine what actually occurred during the training event, phase, or operation. The leader attempts to gather as many views or perspectives—such as from the OPFOR, squad leader, team leader, or rifleman—as feasible. These views help to establish a common understanding of the operation or event. Leaders then understand the complexity of an event and work to solve complex, ill-defined problems quickly. An effective AAR requires an accurate account of events. The evaluator and participants determine what actually happened during the performance of the task.

K-9. After establishing the events that occurred, the AAR covers what was right or wrong with what happened. Participants identify the strong and weak points of their performances based on the commander's guidance and performance measures. The facilitator guides discussions to ensure maximum input that is operationally sound and relevant to the training event. Effectively guided discussions reach conclusions that are doctrinally sound, consistent with Army standards, and relevant to the unit mission.

K-10. The AAR concludes as participants determine how the unit should complete the task differently next time. The facilitator guides the unit in self-determining how it might perform the task more effectively in the future. The unit identifies problems and provides solutions as well as identifies who is responsible for making the recommended changes. Additionally, the facilitator guides the discussion to determine a more effective way to train the tasks to achieve the commander's guidance.

PLANNING CONSIDERATIONS

K-11. Commanders identify opportunities to conduct AARs, assign evaluator responsibilities, and specify the time and resources to conduct AARs. As leaders conduct training, subordinate leaders assess unit and leader proficiency on collective and individual tasks, conduct on-the-spot coaching, and lead informal AARs. These tasks require that leaders understand the commander's intent, guidance, concept of operations, and training objectives.

K-12. The amount and level of detail needed during the planning and preparation processes depend on the type of AAR to be conducted and available resources. The AAR process has four steps:

- Plan.
- Execute.
- Evaluate.
- Integrate and share lessons learned.

STEP 1: PLAN

K-13. Commanders provide their guidance to develop an AAR plan for each training event. Subordinates determine how to achieve the commander's guidance. The guidance applies to formal and informal AARs and identifies—

- Who conducts the AAR.
- Who provides information.
- Aspects of the operation an AAR evaluates.
- Who attends the AAR.

- When and where the AAR occurs.
- A senior trainer to capture the results of the AAR and to integrate results into training in accordance with the 8-Step Training Model.

K-14. Leaders or evaluators use the AAR plan to identify critical locations and events to observe so they can provide the unit a timely and valid assessment. Critical places can include unit maintenance collection points, passage points, and unit aid stations. The AAR plan identifies responsible persons (internal or external to the unit) who facilitate the AAR for a particular event. The leader or evaluator is the individual tasked to observe training, provide control for the training, and lead the AAR.

Selecting and Training Evaluators

K-15. Commanders select leaders and evaluators who—
- Have demonstrated task proficiency.
- Know the duties they are observing.
- Know current doctrine.

K-16. External evaluators are at least equal in rank to the leader of the unit they assess. Evaluators are not responsible for training the unit. That responsibility lies exclusively with the unit chain of command. If commanders choose between experience and an understanding of current doctrine or rank, they should go with experience. A staff sergeant with experience as a tank platoon sergeant is a better platoon evaluator than a sergeant first class who has no platoon sergeant experience. Commanders are responsible for training and certifying evaluators to include providing training on conducting AARs.

Reviewing Training and Evaluation Outlines

K-17. When planning the AAR, unit leaders review applicable training and evaluation outlines to understand task requirements and standards.

Scheduling Stopping Points

K-18. Leaders schedule the time and place to conduct AARs as an integral part of training events. They plan for AARs during and at the end of each critical phase or major training event. For example, a leader may plan a stopping point after issuing an operation order, upon the unit's arrival at a new position, or after consolidation on an objective.

Determining Attendance

K-19. The AAR plan specifies who attends each AAR. At each echelon, an AAR has a primary set of participants. At squad and platoon levels, everyone attends and participates. At company or higher levels, it may not be practical to have everyone attend because of continuing operations or training. At company or higher levels, unit and OPFOR commanders, unit leaders, and other key players may be the only participants. Leaders or evaluators recommend additional participants attend based on specific observations.

Choosing Training Aids

K-20. Effective training aids directly support the discussion of the training and promote learning. The local training support center catalogs available training aids. Home station training support center support and training aids are available within the Army Training Support Enterprise. Under the right conditions, dry-erase boards, video equipment, digital maps, terrain models, and enlarged maps support AAR discussions. For example, if reconnaissance reveals no sites provide a view of the exercise area, the AAR facilitator can use a terrain table or digital map. When choosing training aids in the AAR plan, leaders consider terrain visibility, group size, suitability to task, and availability of electrical power. Leaders need only use a training aid if it makes the AAR better.

Reviewing the After Action Review Plan

K-21. The AAR plan is only a guide. Leaders and evaluators regularly review the AAR plan during training meetings to ensure the training meeting stays on topic and the plan meets the unit's training needs. Commanders, leaders, and evaluators can adjust the plan as necessary, but changes take preparation and planning time away from subordinate leaders or evaluators.

Using After Action Review Facilitators

K-22. AAR facilitators are either internal or external evaluators. Internal facilitators participate in the training and are part of the organization whereas external facilitators do not. Facilitators have the responsibility to make and consolidate insights, observations, and lessons to facilitate the discussion of what happened. They accurately record what they see and hear to prevent loss of valuable information and feedback. These records include events, actions, and observations by time sequence. Facilitators use any recording system—such as notebooks, mobile devices, prepared forms, index cards, or video cameras—as long as it is reliable and sufficiently detailed (identifying times, places, and names). A recording system notates the date-time group of each observation so evaluators can easily integrate their observations with observations of other evaluators. This collection of observations provides a comprehensive and detailed overview of what happened.

K-23. Facilitators determine when and where to observe training. The best location is where the performance of important tasks will occur. They do not always need to stay close to the unit leader. They should position themselves to avoid distracting training participants. Facilitators also avoid compromising the unit's location or guidance by being obvious. They are professional, courteous, and as unobtrusive as possible at all times. They look and act like a member of the unit. For example, facilitators use individual and vehicle camouflage, movement techniques, and cover and concealment.

Selecting After Action Review Sites

K-24. AARs occur at or near the training site. During formal AARs, leaders identify and inspect designated AAR sites and prepare a site diagram showing the placement of training aids and other equipment. Designated AAR sites allow pre-positioning of training aids and rapid assembly of key personnel, minimizing wasted time.

K-25. An effective AAR site allows Soldiers to see the terrain where training took place. If this is not possible, the trainer finds a location that allows them to see the terrain where the most critical or significant actions occurred. Time and resources determine the type and complexity of the terrain model, enlarged map, sketch, or copy of the unit's graphics.

Collecting Observations

K-26. Leaders and senior evaluators need a complete picture of what happened during the training to conduct an effective AAR. During an informal AAR, the leader or facilitator can rely upon the input from the unit during the AAR or gather observations from subordinates and OPFOR (if applicable). The observations gathered assist the leader with gaining an understanding of the operation from subordinate leaders that help drive the AAR.

K-27. During a formal AAR, the senior evaluator receives input from subordinates, supporting units, and adjacent units. This combined input provides the senior evaluator with a comprehensive review of the observed unit and its impact on the higher unit's mission. The senior evaluator also receives input from OPFOR leaders, players, and evaluators.

Organizing the After Action Review

K-28. The facilitator gathers all the information from evaluators and observers and organizes notes in a chronological sequence to understand the flow of events. The facilitator selects and sequences key events of the operation in their relevance to the commander's guidance, training objectives, tasks to train, and key discussion or teaching points.

K-29. The facilitator then organizes the AAR using one of three techniques: chronological order of events, warfighting functions, or key events, themes, or issues. The chronological order of events technique is logical, structured, and easy to understand. It follows the flow of training from start to finish. By covering actions in the order they took place, Soldiers and leaders can better recall what happened. The warfighting functions technique structures the AAR using the warfighting functions. The AAR focuses on the warfighting functions and their associated systems (people, organizations, information, and processes) and links to the commander's guidance and training objectives. Participants can identify strengths and weaknesses across all phases and can recommend solutions. This technique is useful in training staff sections. The last technique focuses on key events, themes, or issues. This technique focuses on critical training events, which directly support training objectives. This technique is effective when time is limited.

Rehearsing

K-30. Facilitators rehearse delivery of the AAR. They also rehearse with any supporting evaluators and observers as necessary. This rehearsal includes considering the possible questions or issues that participants may broach. Effective rehearsals include all the training resources that the actual AAR will use.

STEP 2: EXECUTE

K-31. The AAR begins when training activities stop, AAR preparation is complete, and key players assemble at the designated AAR site. The facilitator reviews the purpose and sequence of the AAR to ensure everyone understands why the AAR is conducted. The purpose of the AAR is for participants to discover strengths and weaknesses, propose solutions, and adopt actions to improve performance.

Provide an Introduction and Rules

K-32. First, the facilitator introduces everyone and requests the following:
- Everyone participates if they have an insight, observation, or question that will help the unit identify and correct deficiencies or sustain strengths. The AAR is a dynamic, candid, and professional discussion of training that focuses on unit performance measured against the task standards (as expressed in the training and evaluation outline).
- Participants avoid using the AAR as a critique. No one—regardless of rank, position, or strength of personality—has all the information or answers. AARs maximize training benefits by allowing Soldiers to learn from each other.
- The AAR focuses on identifying weaknesses to improve and strengths to sustain.

K-33. Soldier participation directly correlates to the atmosphere created during the introduction and command climate. The AAR leader makes a concerted effort to draw in Soldiers who seem reluctant to participate. The following guidance can help the facilitator create an atmosphere conducive to maximum participation:
- Permit respectful disagreement.
- Focus on learning and encourage people to give honest opinions.
- Use open-ended and leading questions to guide the discussion of performance.
- Enter the discussion only when necessary.

State the Agenda

K-34. The leader or evaluator states the AAR agenda. The leader or evaluator reviews the commander's training objectives and restates the tasks reviewed, including conditions and standards for the tasks. Using tools—such as maps, operational graphics, terrain boards, sticks, and rocks—the commander or leader restates the mission, guidance, and concept of operations. The leader or evaluator may guide the discussion to ensure everyone understands the plan and the commander's guidance. Another technique is to have subordinate leaders restate the mission and discuss the commander's guidance and concept of operations.

K-35. In a formal AAR, the OPFOR commander explains the OPFOR plan and actions. The OPFOR commander uses the same training aids as the friendly force commander, so that all participants understand the correlation between the plans.

Summarize What Happened

K-36. The facilitator guides the review using a logical sequence of events to describe and discuss what happened. The facilitator and participants determine to the extent possible what actually happened during the training event, phase, or operation. The leader gathers as many views or perspectives (such as from the OPFOR, squad leader, team leader, and rifleman) as possible. These varied perspectives help the facilitator to establish a common understanding. Leaders then understand the complexity of an event and work to solve complex, ill-defined problems.

K-37. The facilitator does not ask yes or no questions but encourages participation and guides discussion by using open-ended, leading questions. An open-ended question allows the person answering to reply based on what was significant to the Soldier. Open-ended questions are also much less likely to put Soldiers on the defensive; these questions are more effective in finding out what happened. As the discussion expands and more Soldiers add their perspectives, a clearer picture of what really happened emerges. The facilitator does not tell the Soldiers or leaders what was good or bad. The facilitator ensures that participants reveal specific issues, both positive and negative.

Identify What Needs Improvement or Sustainment

K-38. The unit discusses both its successes and failures in the context of the training mission, objectives, and performance measures. Participants consider whether the resulting decisions and actions were ethical, effective, and efficient. To sustain success, the unit needs to know what it performs well. Also participants concentrate on identifying what went wrong and not on the person responsible. If necessary, it is better to identify the duty position rather than the person. For example, they refer to "the platoon leader" rather than to "2LT Wilson."

Determine How the Task Should Be Done Differently

K-39. The facilitator helps the unit determine a more effective method for the unit to perform the task in the future. The unit identifies conditions to modify to increase complexity. A more complex training environment challenges leaders and subordinates so they can better identify opportunities to take prudent risk within the commander's guidance. Additionally, the facilitator guides the discussion to determine a more effective method the unit can implement to train the tasks to achieve the commander's guidance.

Provide Closing Comments

K-40. During the summary, the facilitator reviews and summarizes key points identified during the discussion. The AAR ends on a constructive note and links conclusions to future training. The facilitator then leaves the immediate area so the unit or subordinate leaders and Soldiers can discuss the training in private.

STEP 3: EVALUATE

K-41. AARs provide leaders a critical tool to evaluate training. Through the professional and candid discussion of performance, Soldiers can compare their performance against the standard and identify specific ways to improve proficiency. The benefits of AARs come from applying results in developing future training. Commanders use the results gathered from AARs to help assess unit performance and to plan future training.

STEP 4: INTEGRATE AND SHARE LESSONS LEARNED

K-42. Implementing and sharing lessons learned from AARs are an important last step in the AAR process. Commanders must use AARs and lessons learned to shape training and operations to correct identified deficiencies and sustain superior performance. Lessons learned from the AAR process are always recorded. Additionally, at higher echelons the results of AARs and their lessons learned are shared with other units— and the Army—in the after action report.

K-43. Commanders organize and write after action reports and lessons learned in a logical, chronological order, usually by operational phase or warfighting function. The after action report provides observations and insights from the lessons learned that allow the unit to reflect on the operation, and share these lessons with

the Army. Documenting what did not work well and the actions established to correct future performance, should receive as much attention as what did work well.

K-44. The format and content of an after action report is at the discretion of the commander. They are retained by the unit, periodically reviewed and discussed by leaders, and provided to the next higher commander for comment and possible dissemination outside the unit and to the Army as appropriate.