

An After Action Review of a Research Project Team: A Teaching Case

Evelyn Hengeveld-Bidmon, Consultant

Mack Center on Nonprofit and Public Sector Management in the Human Services

School of Social Welfare, University of California, Berkeley

2015

The After Action Review Process

The After Action Review process was first conceived and implemented by the US Army in the 1970s to debrief military actions immediately following an event to assess performance, identify strengths and weaknesses, and use the information to enhance performance. The Army continues to conduct them as a continuous improvement approach to improve outcomes and inform training needs.

In the Headquarter of the Department of the Army guide, *“A Leader’s Guide to After-Action Reviews”* publication, AARs are defined as follows:

“An after-action review (AAR) is a professional discussion of an event, focused on performance standards, that enables soldiers to discover for themselves what happened, why it happened, and how to sustain strengths and improve on weaknesses. It is a tool leaders and units can use to get maximum benefit from every mission or task. It provides: 1) candid insights into specific soldier, leader, and unit strengths and weaknesses from various perspectives, 2) feedback and insight critical to battle-focused training, and 3) details often lacking in evaluation reports alone.”

BetterEvaluation.org, a website that provides resources for evaluation practice and theory, refers to the AAR as a tool for facilitating continuous improvement that “if properly conducted across an organization can drive organizational change” and can “turn unconscious learning into tacit” understanding. The Center for Evidence-Based Management, a member-based non-profit organization “dedicated to promoting evidence-based practice in the field of management”, provides extensive resources on its website including several AAR resources. One, a guide developed for the Veteran’s Administration, calls the After Action Review a “simple but powerful tool” to assess performance and “identify and learn from successes and failures”.

After Action Reviews are used to discuss: 1) the desired outcomes of an “action” or event, 2) the actual outcomes, 3) whether and why the outcomes were different than those planned, and 4) what was learned in the process. The AAR process has served as a tool for review and evaluation in the public, non-profit and private sectors. In the field of human services, the process has been used to debrief projects such as the development of an employee orientation program, the implementation of a self-serve kiosk for a county welfare office reception area, or a strategic planning process. Each of these examples provided participants with an opportunity to understand their contribution as well as to collectively reflect on the work that was done and the results achieved.

AARs can be formal, informal or personal (one-on-one) depending on the activity to be reviewed, the level of various team members’ participation in the project, the scope of the project, and a general assessment of what approach might work best. Each type of AAR serves the purpose of generating a rich reflection process. Whether formal, informal or personal, documenting the AAR results will capture the learning for potential use in future projects. While it may be desirable to have a neutral facilitator, thereby allowing all team members to participate equally without responsibility for the process as a whole, any member of a project team can serve as facilitator.

Applying AAR Principles

An AAR was used to debrief the work of a research project team that sought to understand the impacts of the Great Recession on local county human services departments. The project sought to identify innovative approaches and strategies to managing organizations and service delivery under such circumstances and share this information with current and future human services leaders throughout the San Francisco Bay region. The two-year project (2013-2015) included: 1) a review of the literature regarding management practices and strategies employed in public sector social service agencies during economic downturns, 2) interviews with senior managers in Bay Area county human services departments to identify and describe the organizational impacts of the budget cuts, including changes to organizational structure, service delivery models, technology use, and staffing, and to identify innovative strategies for responding to budget cuts, 3) analysis of data gathered via the interviews, and 4) a report documenting the findings to build a cross-county knowledge base to inform current and future agency responses to budget decisions (Graaf et al, 2015)

The Recession Project team included a regional consortium director and faculty member who could maximize the involvement of agency leaders, a regional research director, an experienced retired senior agency manager and consultant who conducted the interviews and the AAR, and two graduate students who conducted the literature review and data analysis.

The use of the AAR was designed to guide the debriefing process by exploring all the elements of the project – team composition, roles and process, and project outcomes – as well as provide documentation that could inform future team-based research projects and provide the foundation for this teaching case.

Setting the Stage

One of the ingredients of successful AAR processes is making sure to include the right people in the debriefing process. Generally, anyone who made a significant contribution to the project or effort should be invited to participate.

The Recession Project AAR was held in a conference room that had plenty of wall space to post chart paper for recording notes. While note taking isn't essential to conducting a successful AAR, it can help keep the group focused on the question at hand, and serves as a good record of the session, which can be especially useful if the type of process or project might be repeated in the future. Since there are other research projects that operate similarly to the Recession Project, the documented AAR results of this project could inform future efforts.

Before beginning the AAR, as the member of the Recession Project team who served as facilitator, I wanted to be sure all the members of the team understood the process and knew what their role would be. I explained what we were going to do – answer a short list of questions together - what the ground rules were, and that it was important to hear from each team member so that our understanding of the project would be complete and reflected everyone's experience and perceptions.

One of the most important aspects of a conducting a successful After Action Review is to get honest, forthright and candid input from all team members. Therefore, it's helpful to begin each session clearly outlining the ground rules for the session. These can be developed in advance, or created with the group, setting the tone for an inclusive process while assuring basic guidelines are established prior to the AAR, then opening the

session with a short brainstorm to identify additional ones. Ground rules may include items such as “only one person speaks at a time”, “every perspective is important – all members are encouraged (or expected) to participate”, “focus on the actions, not the individuals”, and “honesty is essential”. In environments where there is fear of admitting to mistakes, it is essential for the facilitator to take time with this and ensure the process is framed as a learning opportunity, not a time to assign blame to individuals. It is only with the transparency, honesty, and humility of the participants that the AAR process can be most effective. Because the four members of our project team were very collegial, warmly regarded each other, had worked well together, and were comfortable speaking up and sharing their thoughts throughout the project, I didn’t spend as much time on ground rules as I would have with a larger team or one that might have had some difficulties working together.

There are many types of questions or prompts a group can use when holding an AAR. I developed the following ones to review our project:

1. What did we set out to do?
2. What were the key events, meetings, etc. that occurred during the project?
3. What were the roles of the various participants?
4. Was the project successful? Did we achieve what we set out to achieve?
5. What challenges did we face – individually? As a group?
6. What worked well – For you? For the group? To achieve the end product?
7. What, if anything, could have been done differently to achieve a better outcome?
8. What are our “take aways” or recommendations

Each question had its own chart pad page where I recorded the group’s responses.

Over the course of two-hours, we each contributed our thoughts and perceptions as we responded to the questions. While the structure was formal, our process was relaxed and conversational. Because of this, though we answered the questions one-by-one in the order they are listed above, occasional comments arose that were more related to other questions. In those cases, I recorded the answer on the appropriate page. In this way, we were able to capture all thoughts without unnecessarily redirecting someone’s comments, or disrupting the flow of the discussion.

The Results

What did we set out to do and were we successful? (Questions 1 and 4)

As a result of the two-hour debriefing process, we learned that we successfully accomplished the goals we set out to achieve. These included:

- Providing an opportunity for senior managers to debrief after several very challenging years of cutbacks,
- Conducting a cross-case analysis of data related to managing change throughout the period of the Great Recession
- Describing evidence-informed management practices utilized by managers during the recession years,
- Capturing lessons learned from the recession that could inform future practice,
- Providing a full report and presentation to the BASSC directors that included individual county reports, and a cross-county analysis that highlighted innovative practices, and lastly
- Determining the value of engaging a former county manager in BASSC projects.

On more than one occasion, I've conducted AARs where participants noted "mission drift", a project that starts out trying to achieve one thing, but that shifts over time due to external pressures or internal organizational priority changes. This is not unusual and frequently leads AAR participants to identify it as either a positive or negative impact on the project when determining if they achieved the original desired goals. In the case of the Recession Project, we experienced a slight shift in focus – away from exploring the impact on employee morale, roles and responsibilities, and toward innovative organizational responses, but overall the effort stayed true to the original vision, so the change was only noted once in the documentation. Had the shift been significant, it would have generated more comments, about whether the desired results were achieved, and how the overall project was impacted by the change.

What were the key events?

In response to this question, we identified eight key events in addition to the thirty-four interviews conducted for the project. In the Recession Project, all of the key events were meetings - three with county directors, one with county HR managers, and the remainder being meetings of team members. We learned that our initial plan of having only two meetings to share information with the directors was insufficient for a project of such a large scope, and that periodic meetings of team members supported good communication and alignment of work.

In other projects, key events that could be identified in addition to meeting might include a launch date such as a "go live" date for a new computer database, or the opening of a new office, or the start date of a new program, or a date on which an organization changes policy or releases information to staff.

What were the roles of the various participants?

In the process of answering this question, group members not only identified the roles each of the project team members held, but took the opportunity to express appreciation for the value of the contributions each person provided. The question prompted an uncovering of not only the formal or explicit role each individual had, but also the informal role he or she played over the course of the project. For example, in addition to the consortium director serving as the research project leader, he also served as a champion of the project when the county human service directors were often distracted by more urgent issues resulting in reduced attention to the Recession Project. He was also identified as the team member whose humor provided ongoing team member support throughout the many months over which the project unfolded. Likewise, each member's unique contributions – both formal and informal – were identified and acknowledged.

It's important to note that clarifying roles can also lead to an acknowledgement that one or more project team members did not fulfill expectations. If this happens, the facilitator should ensure comments stay focused on the expected role and any gaps there may have been in fulfilling it rather than allow blaming or finger-pointing to occur. Fortunately, with the Recession Project, all team members effectively carried out their roles and contributed to the success of the project.

What challenges did we face?

The group identified multiple challenges that members experienced over the course of the two-year project. Key among them were communications between the team members. Communication challenges involved frequently clarifying roles, managing competing demands, managing time and proximity related to the dispersed locations of the team members, and the ongoing communications with the county directors. While discussing the challenges faced along the way, group members also noted how they were managed. Many of

those comments, such as the high level of professionalism of team members and good coordination and management by the research director, were captured on the page where we identified what went well.

What worked well?

Among the many things the group thought worked well, several of them were directly related to one or more of the team members' skill or attributes. For example, the group thought that things such as "great leadership", "professionalism", "bravery and tenacity", "expertise", "teamwork", "flexibility", and "true curiosity" were individual assets that served the project well. Additionally, certain products were viewed as things that 'worked well'. These included gathering "county-specific data" and the "richness of data", among others.

In my past experience conducting AARs, I've found that this part of the discussion often highlights individual contributions to the effort. While this is appropriate and good, the facilitator should help the group stretch beyond what specific team members did to include other aspects of the work that went well. This might include things such as communication, processes, having people with the right expertise involved.

What could have been done differently to achieve a better outcome?

We didn't specifically focus on this question, in part due to time constraints, and partly because we were pleased with our outcomes - we'd achieved what we set out to do.

What are our recommendations?

Some of our recommendations were simply acknowledgements of what worked well. Other recommendations included developing new ways to interact when not located in close proximity to one another such as video conferencing and exploring ways to engage the county directors in 'real time' so momentum isn't lost while waiting for bi-monthly meetings to be held. In all, there were six recommendations that could inform future projects. In addition to those noted above, responses included "maintain mindfulness of 'actionable' findings". In other words, consider how the data gathered can impact practice, training, and policy development. Building on a perceived strength of the project – having the "right" people involved, another recommendation was to develop criteria to identify the whom to engage in future projects.

Reflections

Having worked in the field of human services for nearly thirty years, I have participated in many projects, service and business process redesign efforts, strategic planning processes, accreditation processes, and other efforts that involve a group of people working together to achieve a common goal. For many of those projects, team members contributed their time, thoughts, and energies to the project until it was completed. While the project might have culminated in a celebratory moment, it was generally a time for congratulations and fanfare, not one for thoughtful reflection on the elements of the work, or time to reflect upon lessons learned. In my experience most projects in human services organizations happen simultaneously with other initiatives or efforts and/or are immediately followed by another one, giving little time for teams to reflect on a project they spent weeks, months or even years working on. The result is that individual team members process on their own, in their own way, with often only their own perspectives being considered. In the best of circumstances, those individuals walk away from the experience with a sense of what they would like to replicate in their future efforts. While this may be a useful process for the individual, the larger organization and the team miss the opportunity to learn from the project's successes, challenges and failures. Additionally, in some

circumstances, an individual's reflection can result in a skewed understanding of what took place and why since they lack the broader perspective that comes from debriefing and reflecting with others who were involved in the work. This can lead to feelings of disappointment or dissatisfaction, which may spread through an organization as individuals talk with each other about their experiences.

In contrast to finishing the project and going our separate ways, the After Action Review process provided our four team members with the opportunity to discuss the project's goals and whether we met them, recognize our challenges and what we did well and not so well, acknowledge our own and each other's contributions, and capture ideas that can be applied to future projects.

As the AAR facilitator and project team member, I came away with a greater understanding of the value of the practice experience that I bring to research work and learned more about the relationship between the research project, the project team, and the county directors. The team members benefitted from an increased understanding of the value of frequent communication and identified ideas for improving communications between our team and with the county agency directors as well as recognizing the value of engaging people with the right experience, skills, and interests in project design and implementation.

Additional After Action Review resources:

The US Army's *Leader's Guide to After Action Reviews*, while developed for military use, is a comprehensive guide for leaders that provides an overview of the AAR process, offers step-by-step instruction in conducting one - including planning for an AAR, questions to use, and facilitation techniques, and how to act on the results of one. http://www.acq.osd.mil/dpap/ccap/cc/jcchb/Files/Topical/After_Action_Report/resources/tc25-20.pdf

BetterEvaluation.org provides brief description of the After Action Review process with an example of an actual AAR. It includes sample AAR questions and their purpose, and "tips and traps" for utilizing and facilitating an AAR, and has links to other AAR resources: http://betterevaluation.org/evaluation-options/after_action_review

The Center for Evidence Based Management (CEBMA) contains extensive resources for managers and leaders, teachers and trainers, and others interested in evidence-based management. The CEBMA's website includes a *Guide to the After Action Review* developed by Veteran's Administration staff that provides an overview of AARs and a three-stage process to utilizing one that includes planning, conducting, and sharing the results of the AAR. It is less comprehensive than the US Army guide, but guides the reader through the process and includes a template for recording AAR results. http://www.cebma.org/wp-content/uploads/Guide-to-the-after_action_review.pdf

Video of an After Action Review: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=74Afb8qLuj0>

References

Graaf, G., Hengeveld-Bidmon, E., Carnochan, S., Radu, P., Austin, M.J.. The impact of the Great Recession on county human service organizations: A cross-case analysis. *Human Service Organizations* (in press for 2016)