

# USDA Forest Service After Action Reviews

An After Action Review (AAR) is a tool for quickly assessing what happened during an activity and whether any lessons from it would help in the future. An AAR is simple, quick, and immediately responsive to the situation and the people involved.

***Purpose:***

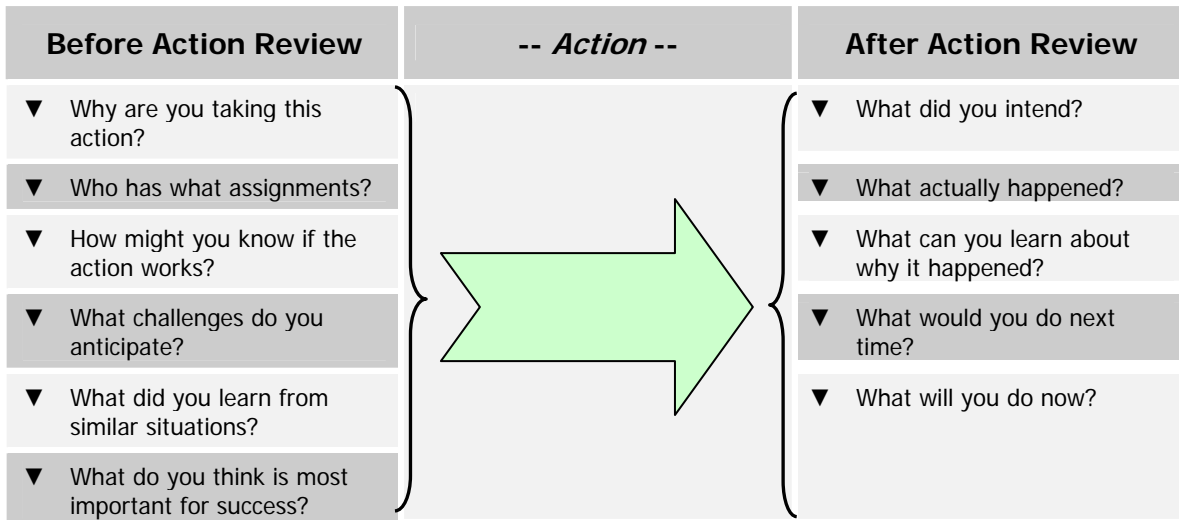
An AAR looks for timely lessons by comparing intentions with outcomes. With practice, AAR techniques often lead to improved performance and greater situation awareness.

***Process:***

A basic AAR addresses 4-5 questions immediately after an activity to capture lessons learned, identify the roots of perceived successes or problems, and assign follow-up responsibilities (see example in right hand column of table).

A more complete process begins before the action with establishing clear understandings of the reasons for the action, assignments during the action, measures of successes or problems, and potential challenges. The more complete process is especially useful if AARs tend to show a lack of agreement about what was intended by the action.

The process can be as formal or informal as needed, but it should be confidential.



***Possible Subjects to Address:***

Reference: [After Action Review \(AAR\) from Wildland Fire Leadership Development Center](#)

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▼ Technical performance</li> <li>▼ Equipment function</li> <li>▼ Techniques</li> <li>▼ Planning</li> <li>▼ Resources</li> <li>▼ Information and data</li> <li>▼ Communication</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▼ Coordination</li> <li>▼ Roles and Responsibilities</li> <li>▼ Effectiveness</li> <li>▼ Unanticipated problems</li> <li>▼ Anticipated problems</li> <li>▼ Risk</li> <li>▼ Situation Awareness</li> </ul> |
|---|--|

### ***Watch-Outs:***

- 👉 Don't engage in competitive analysis: Focus on what's really important, not who's right.
- 👉 Don't get into the weeds: Trivia isn't important.
- 👉 Don't let dominant personalities or job titles get in the way: Get everyone involved.
- 👉 Don't avoid looking at the elephant in the room: Denial of obvious needs for improvement can lead to very serious crises in the future.
- 👉 Don't distribute the raw AAR notes: Use the notes to identify lessons you want to see documented or acted on, but keep the raw notes confidential.
- 👉 Don't use results as the basis for punishment: Enhance future performance.

### ***Techniques and Tips for Facilitators and Participants:***

Preface: Something like, "Remember, our AAR is not about blame, it's about learning. Thomas Edison learned 100 ways not to make a light bulb before he learned how to make one work."

Clarify points through restatement: Repeat long or complicated statements to confirm the point.

Get the elephants out in the open:

- ▼ Try 'negative polling' by asking if anyone thinks \_\_\_\_\_ happened differently or disagrees with a statement that \_\_\_\_\_ happened.
- ▼ Offer your own observations and ask for suggestions about why that might have happened
- ▼ Confirm the implication by saying, "What I hear is that you would do \_\_\_\_\_ the same way again. Is that right?" And, if necessary, connect the action to some consequence that has already been mentioned and was seen as a problem.
- ▼ Push outside the comfort zone by saying something like, "Everyone seems to be saying that \_\_\_\_\_ went well, but isn't \_\_\_\_\_ an example of something you didn't intend?"
- ▼ Use the "5 Whys" to surface underlying contributors to why \_\_\_\_\_ happened (After a statement, ask "why did \_\_\_\_\_ happen?" or "why was \_\_\_\_\_ the case?")

Ask Open-Ended Questions: Ask something like, "What were we trying to accomplish?" instead of stating, "According to our notes, we were trying to accomplish \_\_\_\_\_."

### ***Confidentiality:***

An AAR depends upon honesty and trust. Confidentiality is essential. There's no better way to ensure that an elephant in the room is ignored than by having a process a participant can't trust. To ensure confidentiality, use the last question to think about how you might extract the lessons without distributing the raw AAR notes. Before ending your AAR, review all the results and then ask, "What should we do now to share these lessons or improve our next \_\_\_\_\_?"

### ***Resources:***

[Facilitating an After Action Review \(AAR\)](#)

[Building with the AAR cycle](#)

[Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center - AAR](#)

[Leadership Development - Toolbox](#)

[Learning In the Thick of It, HBR](#)

[After action reviews - KM toolkit](#)