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# Leader's Guide to After-Action Reviews (AAR)

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## Definition and Purpose of After Action Reviews (AAR)

The purpose of AAR's is to provide the feedback essential to correcting training deficiencies. Feedback is direct, on-the-spot and standards based. Each time incorrect performance is observed it is noted, and if it does not interfere with training, be corrected. During individual training this is easy to do. In collective training, such as STX, it may not be possible to interrupt the exercise just to correct a soldier who is performing an individual task improperly. This is why an AAR should be planned at the completion of each mission or phase to provide immediate feedback to the Soldiers being trained.

AAR's are a professional discussion of an event that enables Soldiers/units to discover for themselves what happened and develop a strategy (e.g., retraining) for improvement. They provide candid insights into strengths and weaknesses from various perspectives and feedback, and focus directly on the commander's intent, training objectives and standards. Leaders know and enforce standards for collective and individual tasks. Task standards are performance measures found in the respective training and evaluation outlines (T&EO).

Leaders must avoid creating the environment of a critique during AAR's. Because Soldiers and leaders participating in an AAR actively discover what happened and why, they learn and remember more than they would from a critique alone. A critique only gives one viewpoint and frequently provides little opportunity for discussion of events by participants. The climate of the critique, focusing only on what is wrong, prevents candid discussion of training events and stifles learning and team building.

Leaders must also make on-the-spot corrections and take responsibility for training Soldiers and units. This occurs when leaders understand the commander's intent, tasks to be trained and exercise the principles of *Mission Command* to improve soldier, leader, and unit performance. Units that conduct AAR's and empower subordinates to make on-the-spot corrections are more effective.

Effective AAR's are a reflection of the commander and his role in training. AAR's foster an environment of trust, collaboration, initiative, and a co-creation of context necessary among Soldiers and leaders in decentralized operations. Soldiers learn and understand the commander's intent and act decisively while accepting prudent risks.

AAR's during training include the same four parts as AAR's during operations:

- **Review what was supposed to occur.** The facilitator, along with the participants, reviews what was supposed to happen. This review is based on the commander's intent, training objectives and tasks to train. This information is usually found in the operations order or on the training schedule.

- **Establish what happened.** The facilitator and participants determine to the extent possible what actually occurred during the training event, phase or the operation. The leader attempts to gather as many views or perspectives (OPFOR, squad leader, team leader, rifleman, etc.) as feasible and possible. This helps to establish a common understanding and instill operational adaptability. Leaders then understand the complexity of an event and work to solve complex, ill defined problems quickly.
- **Determine what was right or wrong with what happened.** Participants then establish the strong and weak points of their performance based on the commander's intent and performance measures. The facilitator guides discussions to ensure maximum input; is operationally sound and relevant to the training event.
- **Determine how the task should be done differently next time.** The facilitator guides the unit in determining how the task(s) might be performed more effectively in the future. The unit identifies problems and provides solutions as well as identifies who will make those solutions. Additionally, the facilitator guides the discussion to determine if there is a more effective way to train the tasks to achieve the commanders' intent.

## Types of AAR's

There are two types of AAR's, formal and informal. A formal AAR is resource-intensive and involves the planning, coordination, and preparation of the AAR site, supporting training aids, and support personnel. Informal AAR's require less preparation and planning.

### Formal

Leaders plan formal AAR's at the same time they finalize their training plan (six to eight weeks before execution). Formal AAR's require more planning and preparation than informal AAR's. They require site reconnaissance and selection, coordination for training aids (terrain models, map blow-ups, etc.), and selection, set up, and maintenance of the AAR site.

During formal AAR's, the AAR facilitator (unit leader or OC) identifies and facilitates a discussion of specific event(s) based on training objectives, performance measures and the commander's intent. The facilitator provides an overview of the event(s) of what was supposed to happen and facilitates a discussion of what happened, the identification of strengths, weaknesses and

issues. Participants are able to then identify what retraining needs to be done, and how to conduct the tasks differently.

At the end, the facilitator reviews key points, and issues, and summarizes strengths and weaknesses and the plan to train tasks differently to meet the commander’s intent.

**Informal**

Leaders and OCs use informal AAR’s in much the same way as the formal AAR. Leaders conduct the informal AAR after previously identified events or as on-the-spot coaching tools while reviewing soldier and unit performances during training. Both AAR’s involve all Soldiers and focus on what was planned, what happened, what worked and a determination of how to improve performance and increase complexity within the commander’s intent.

The most significant difference between the formal and informal AAR is that informal AAR’s require fewer training aids. Informal AAR’s provide immediate feedback to Soldiers, leaders, and units during training. Ideas and solutions the unit gathers during informal AAR’s can be immediately put to use as the unit continues its training.

For example, after destroying an enemy observation post (OP) during a movement to contact, the squad leader conducts an informal AAR to make corrections and reinforce strengths. Using nothing more than pinecones to represent squad members, the squad leader and squad members discuss the contact from start to finish. The squad quickly—

- Identifies what was supposed to happen
- Establishes what happened from all levels
- Evaluates performance against the Army standard (e.g., T&EO’s)
- Identifies strengths and weaknesses
- Identifies opportunities to improve performance within the commanders intent when training continues

**Summary of the Type of AAR’s**

Formal Reviews	Informal Reviews
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conducted by either internal or external leaders and external observer and controllers (OC)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conducted by internal chain of command</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Takes more time to prepare</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Takes less time prepare</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Uses complex training aids</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Uses simple training aids</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Scheduled – events and / or tasks are identified beforehand</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conducted when needed. Primarily based on leaders assessment</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conducted where best supported</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Held at the training site</li> </ul>

**AAR Fundamentals:**

- Conducted during or immediately after each event
- Focused on commanders intent, training objectives and standards
- Focus on Soldier, leader, and unit performance
- Involves all participants in the discussion
- Use open-ended questions
- Encourages initiative and innovation in finding more effective ways to achieve standards and meet training objectives and commanders intent
- Determines strengths and weaknesses
- Link performance to subsequent training

**AAR Format:**

- Review what was supposed to happen:
  - State the training objectives and tasks to train
  - Review OPFOR (if used) mission and purpose
  - Review unit leader mission, intent and concept of operations
- Review what happened for a particular event (all levels), a technique is to approach chronologically e.g.,:
  - Review actions before first detection
  - Review report of first detection or contact
  - Review reaction to detection or contact
  - Review any FRAGO's if used
  - Review events during engagement
- Review what went right and wrong (all levels):
  - Review extent to which unit met training objectives
  - Review extent that the commander's intent was met
  - Have participants summarize the major learning points
  - Identify training deficiencies
  - Identify unit's ability to perform task and meet commander's intent
  - Identify risks and measures employed to mitigate the risks
- Determine how event or task should be done next time
  - Identify if retraining should occur
  - Identify the conditions to modify
  - Identify which tasks to retrain to meet the commander's intent
  - Identify a more effective way to meet the commander's intent

## AAR Planning and Execution

To maximize the effectiveness of AAR's, formal or informal, leaders must plan and prepare. AAR planning is part of each training event. All leaders must understand the unit's mission and the commander's intent for the upcoming event(s). During planning, commanders identify tasks and events to conduct an AAR, as appropriate assigns OC responsibilities, and ensure the allocation of time and resources to conduct AAR's. As training is conducted, subordinate leaders assess unit and leader proficiency on collective and individual tasks and conduct on-the-spot coaching / informal AAR's. This requires that leaders understand the commanders intent, concept of operations and task(s) to be trained during an event.

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

- Step 1. Planning
- Step 2. Preparing
- Step 3. Conducting
- Step 4. Follow up (using AAR results)

### Step 1: Planning the AAR

Commanders are responsible for training their units. They hold subordinate leaders responsible for training their respective organizations. Commanders instill *mission command* by using orders for events to enable disciplined initiative within the commander's intent to empower agile and adaptive leaders. The AAR helps Soldiers develop a mutual understanding of the unit's strengths and weaknesses. Commanders must issue guidance and specify their intent for an upcoming events AAR.

The AAR plan provides the foundation for successful AAR's. Commanders provide their intent and guidance to develop an AAR plan for each training event. Subordinates then determine how to achieve the commander's intent. The guidance applies for formal and informal AAR's and should contain--

- Which tasks are trained and are the focus of the AAR
- Which events / phases of the operation are AAR's conducted
- Who observes the training and who conducts the AAR
- Who at a minimum attends
- When and where the AAR occurs
- What training aids are required

Leaders or OCs use the AAR plan to identify critical places and events they must observe to provide the unit a valid assessment; examples include unit maintenance collection points, passage points, and unit aid stations. The AAR plan also includes who (either internal or external to the unit) facilitates the AAR for a particular event. The leader or OC is the individual tasked to observe training, provide control for the training, and lead the AAR.

### **Selecting and Training Observers Controllers (OC)**

When planning an AAR, commanders select leaders/OCs who—

- Demonstrate proficiency in the tasks to be trained
- Are knowledgeable of the duties they are to observe
- Are knowledgeable of current doctrine and TTPs

When using external OCs, commanders strive to have OCs that are at least equal in rank to the leader of the unit they will assess. If commanders must choose between experience and understanding of current TTPs or rank, they should go with experience. A staff sergeant with experience as a tank platoon sergeant is a better platoon OC than a sergeant first class who has no platoon sergeant experience.

Commanders are responsible for training OCs to include training on how to conduct an AAR. Ideally, inexperienced OCs should observe properly conducted AAR's beforehand.

### **Reviewing the Training & Evaluation Outline (T&EO)**

The commander must specify their intent for the event along with the objectives and tasks to be trained. The commander also states the operational environment that is to be replicated during the upcoming event and the focus of the tasks trained. The leaders then review the T&EO which provide the tasks, conditions, and standards for the respective collective or individual tasks. Leaders use the T&EO's to measure unit and soldier performance.

T&EO's are located on the Digital Training Management System ([DTMS](#)) DTMS and via the Army Training Network ([ATN](#)). Leaders and OC's must review the tasks to be trained as specified in the commander's guidance and intent for an upcoming event. The respective T&EO's are not only provided to remaining OC team members but also to the Soldiers in the unit. The T&EO states the performance measures and the order specifies the commander's intent. All members of the unit must review these documents to gain a mutual understanding of the critical places and phases to assess their performance.

### **Schedule Stopping Points**

Commanders schedule time to conduct AAR's as an integral part of training events. Commanders plan for an AAR at the end of each critical phase or major

training event. For example, a leader may plan a stopping point after issuing an OPORD, when the unit arrives at a new position, after consolidation on an objective, etc.

Commanders plan to allow approximately 30-45 minutes for platoon-level AAR's, 1 hour for company-level AAR's, and about 2 hours for battalion-level and above. Soldiers receive better feedback on their performance and remember the lessons longer as result of a quality AAR.

### **Determining Attendance**

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. In this case, unit and OPFOR commanders, unit leaders, and other key players may be the only participants. Leaders or OCs may recommend additional participants based on specific observations

### **Choosing Training Aids**

Training aids add to AAR effectiveness. Training aids should directly support discussion of the training and promote learning. Local training support center (TSC) catalogs list training aids available to each unit. Dry-erase boards, video equipment, digital maps, terrain models, and enlarged maps are all worthwhile under the right conditions. For example, if reconnaissance reveals there are no sites which provided a view of the exercise area, the AAR facilitator may want to use a terrain table, or digital map if available.

Terrain visibility, group size, suitability to task, and availability of electrical power are all things to consider when selecting training aids. The key is planning and coordination, but only use a training aid if it makes the AAR better.

Home station TSC support and training aids are available within the Army training support system (TSS).

### **Reviewing the AAR Plan**

The AAR plan is only a guide. Commanders issue their intent, and subordinates determine how to achieve that intent. Commanders, leaders and OCs should review it regularly (e.g., training meeting) to make sure it is still on track and meets the training needs of the units. The plan may be adjusted as necessary, but changes take preparation and planning time away from subordinate leaders or OCs. The purpose of the AAR plan is to allow OCs and leaders as much time as possible to prepare for the AAR.

## Step 2: Preparing the AAR

Preparation is the key to the effective execution of any plan. Preparing for an AAR begins before the training and continues until the actual event.

### Review Training Objectives, T&EO's, Orders, and Doctrine

Leaders and OCs must review the commanders intent, operation order, training objectives and T&EO's before training, and again immediately before the AAR. The commander's intent and training objectives are the basis for observations and the focus of the AAR. Leaders and OCs review current doctrine, technical information, and applicable unit SOPs to ensure they have the tools to properly observe unit and individual performance.

Leaders and OCs read and understand all OPORDs and fragmentary orders (FRAGOs) the unit issues before and during training in order to understand what is supposed to happen. The detailed knowledge OCs display as result of these reviews gives added credibility to their assessments.

### Identify Key Events

Based on the commanders intent leaders or OCs identify which events are critical, and make sure they are positioned in the right place at the right time to observe the unit's actions. Examples of critical events include—

- Issue of OPORDs and FRAGOs
- TLPs
- Contact with opposing forces
- Resupply and reconstitution operations
- Passage of lines

### Observe the Training and Take Notes

AAR Facilitators are either internal (participating in the training) leaders or external (OCs) to the organization. Both have the requirement to make and consolidate observations to facilitate the discussion of what happened. The OC keeps accurate records of what they see and hear, and record events, actions, and observations by time sequence to prevent loss of valuable information and feedback. OCs can use any recording system (notebook, prepared forms, 3x5 cards) as long as it is reliable, sufficiently detailed (identifying times, places, and names), and consistent. They include the date-time group (DTG) of each observation so it can be easily integrated with observations of other OCs. This provides a comprehensive and detailed overview of what happened. When the OC has more time, they review the notes and fill in any details not written down earlier.

At times this may be challenging for leaders that are actively participating in the event and also facilitating the AAR. But this can be mitigated through

professional discussions, feedback and involvement of all participants in the AAR to develop a clear understanding of the event. The observations of all participants during the event not only allow for an understanding of the execution of the task(s) but also the impact of the operational environment. This sharing of observations allows Soldiers and leaders to develop mutual trust through a common understanding of the unit's strengths and weaknesses.

One of the most difficult OC tasks is to determine when and where to observe training. The OC does not always need to stay close to the unit leader. The best location is where one can observe the performance of critical tasks and the overall flow of unit actions. The position cannot be a training distracter; look and act like a member of the unit (using individual and vehicle camouflage, movement techniques, cover and concealment, etc.). The OC cannot compromise the unit's location or intent by being obvious. The OC is professional, courteous, and as unobtrusive as possible at all times.

### **Selecting AAR Sites**

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

During informal AAR's, leaders also conduct the AAR at or near the training site. The primary difference is that the training aids are minimal and often found on the ground (rocks, twigs, etc). Based on the commander's intent the leader makes a determination of the time and location of the AAR site.

The AAR site needs to allow Soldiers to see the terrain where the exercise or 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 or enlarged map or sketch and a copy of the unit's graphics. This ensures everyone can relate key events to the actual terrain.

The leader or OC make Soldiers attending the AAR as comfortable as possible by removing helmets, providing shelter from the elements, having refreshments (coffee, water), thereby creating an environment where participants can focus on the AAR without distractions. Participants should not face into the sun, and key leaders should have seats up front. Vehicle parking and equipment security areas should be far enough away from the AAR site to prevent distractions.

**Collect Observations**

Leaders and senior OC's need a complete picture of what happened during the training to conduct an effective AAR. The Army problem solving process can assist leaders and OC's and helps establish the base logic for gathering information and observation.

During the Informal AAR the leader or facilitator can rely upon the input from the unit during the AAR or gather observations from his subordinates and OPFOR (if applicable). The observations gathered assist the leader with gaining an understanding of the operation from subordinate leaders which will help drive the AAR.

During the Formal AAR the senior OC receives input from subordinates, and supporting and adjacent units provide the senior OC a comprehensive review of the unit they observed and their impact on the higher unit's mission. The senior OC also receives input from OPFOR leaders, players, and OCs. The enemy's perspective is critical in identifying why a unit was or was not successful. During formal AAR's, the OPFOR leader briefs his plan and intent to set the stage for a discussion of what happened and why.

**Organize the AAR**

The leader or OC gather all the information / observations and organize notes in a chronological sequence in order to understand the flow of events. The leader or OC select and sequence key events or the operation in terms of their relevance to the commander's intent, training objectives, tasks to train and identifying key discussion and/or teaching points.

The purpose of the discussion is for participants to discover strengths and weaknesses, propose solutions, and adopt a course of action to correct problems. Leaders and OCs organize the AAR using one of three techniques:

- **Chronological Order of Events:** This 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 are better able to recall what happened.
- **Warfighting Functions (WfF):** This technique structures the AAR using the WFF. The focus is on each WfF and their associated systems (people, organizations, information, and processes) and linked to the commanders intent and training objectives. Participants can identify systemic strengths and weaknesses across all phases and recommend solutions. This technique is useful in training staff sections.

- **Key Events/Themes/Issues:** Key events discussion focuses on critical training events, which directly support training objectives identified by the chain of command before the exercise began. This technique is particularly effective when time is limited.

### Rehearse

Formal AAR's - After thorough preparation, the OC reviews the AAR format and gets ready to conduct the AAR. The OC then announces to unit leaders the AAR starting time and location. This allows enough time for the OC's to prepare and rehearse at the AAR site while unit leaders account for personnel and equipment, perform actions which their unit SOP requires, and move to the AAR site.

Informal AAR's – Often leaders have minimal time to prepare for AAR's and as time permits they identify and prioritize key observations. They then mentally review the training event in light of the observations gathered personally and from subordinates, based on one of the three techniques discussed previously. This allows the leader to mentally step through the AAR.

## Step 3: Conducting the AAR

The training exercise has reached a stopping point, AAR preparation is complete, and key players are at the designated AAR site. If necessary, the leader or OC reviews the purpose and sequence of the AAR to ensure everyone understands why an AAR is conducted. It is now time to conduct the AAR.

### Introduction and Rules

The introduction should include the following thoughts--

- **Everyone must participate** if they have an insight, observation, or question which will help the unit identify and correct deficiencies or sustain strengths. The AAR is a dynamic, candid, professional discussion of training that focuses on unit performance measured against the Army standard.
- **The AAR is not a critique.** No one, regardless of rank, position, or strength of personality, has all of the information or answers. AAR's maximize training benefits by allowing Soldiers to learn from each other.
- **The AAR does not grade success or failure.** There are always weaknesses to improve and strengths to sustain.

Soldier participation is directly related 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 techniques can help the leader or OC create an atmosphere conducive to maximum participation. The leader or OC should--

- Reinforce the fact that it is permissible to disagree.
- Focus on learning and encourage people to give honest opinions.

- Use open-ended and leading questions to guide the discussion of soldier, leader, and unit performance.
- Enter the discussion only when necessary.

**AAR AGENDA:****Commander's Mission, Intent and Concept of the Operation  
(What Was Supposed To Happen)**

The leader or OC review the commanders training objectives and restates the tasks being reviewed, including the conditions and standards for the tasks.

Using maps, operational graphics, terrain boards, sticks, rocks, etc., the commander/leader restates the mission, intent and concept of the operation. The leader or OC may guide the discussion to ensure everyone understands the plan and the commander's intent. Another technique is to have subordinate leaders restate the mission and discuss the commander's intent and concept of operation.

In a formal AAR, the OPFOR commander explains his plan and actions. Using the same training aids as the friendly force commander, participants can understand the relationship of both plans.

**Summary of Events (What Happened)**

The leader or OC guides the review using a logical sequence of events to describe and discuss what happened.

The facilitator (leader or OC) and participants determine to the extent possible what actually happened during the training event, phase or the operation. The leader attempts to gather as many views or perspectives (OPFOR, squad leader, team leader, rifle man, etc.) as feasible and possible. This helps to establish a common understanding and instill operational adaptability. Leaders then understand the complexity of an event and work to solve complex, ill defined problems quickly.

A discussion of the units risk assessment conducted prior to the event and how the Soldiers applied measures to mitigate the risks. This is critical to helping Soldiers understand risk, act decisively and accept prudent risk in the future.

The leader or OC does not ask yes or no questions, but encourages participation and guides discussion by using open-ended and 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. For example, it is better to ask: "SGT Johnson, what happened when

your Stryker crested the hill?" Rather than—. "SGT Johnson, why didn't you engage the enemy infantry to your front?"

As the discussion expands and more Soldiers add their perspectives, what really happened, becomes obvious. The leader or OC does not tell the Soldiers or leaders what was good or bad. The leader or OC must ensure specific issues are revealed, both positive and negative. Skillful guidance of the discussion will ensure the AAR does not gloss over mistakes or unit weaknesses.

#### **Identify what was Right or Wrong**

The unit must discuss both success and failure in the context of the commander's intent, objectives and performance measures. To sustain success, the unit needs to know what it is doing well. Also, concentrate on identifying what was wrong versus who was wrong.

#### **Determine how the task should be done differently**

The facilitator (leader or OC) helps the unit in determining how the task(s) might be performed more effectively in the future. The unit identifies the conditions to modify to increase complexity, challenges leaders and subordinates to identify opportunities to take prudent risk within the commander's intent. Additionally, the facilitator guides the discussion to determine if there is a more effective way to train the tasks to achieve the commanders' intent.

#### **Closing Comments (Summary)**

During the summary, the leader or OC reviews and summarizes key points identified during the discussion. The leader or OC ends the AAR on a positive note and links conclusions to future training. The leader or OC then leaves the immediate area to allow unit or subordinate leaders and soldier's time to discuss the training in private.

### **Step 4: Benefits of AAR's**

AAR's are the dynamic link between task performance and execution to standard. They provide commanders a critical assessment tool to plan soldier, leader, and unit training. Through the professional and candid discussion of events, Soldiers can compare their performance against the standard and identify specific ways to improve proficiency.

Leaders should not delay retraining except when absolutely necessary. If the leader delays retraining, the Soldiers and unit must understand they did not perform the task to standard and that retraining will occur later.

The true benefits of AAR's come from applying results in developing future training. Leaders can use the information to assess performance and to plan future training to correct deficiencies and sustain demonstrated task proficiency.

**Retraining**

Time or complexity of the mission may prevent retraining on some tasks during the same exercise. When this happens, leaders must reschedule the mission or training. As part of this process, leaders must ensure that deficient supporting tasks found during the AAR are also scheduled and retrained.

**Revised Standing Operating Procedures**

AAR's may reveal problems with unit SOPs. If so, unit leaders must revise the SOP and ensure units implement the changes during future training.

**Additional Resources:** See Unit Training Management (UTM) on [ATN](#).