NANO TOOLS FOR LEADERS®

AFTER-ACTION REVIEWS: A SIMPLE YET POWERFUL TOOL

Nano Tools for Leaders® are fast, effective leadership tools that you can learn and start using in less than 15 minutes—with the potential to significantly impact your success as a leader and the engagement and productivity of the people you lead.

THE GOAL

Create a culture of continuous performance improvement and adaptive learning by systematically reviewing team successes and failures.

NANO TOOL

Called "one of the most successful organizational learning methods yet devised," the after-action review (AAR) was developed by the United States Army in the 1970s to help its soldiers learn from both their mistakes and achievements. Since then, many companies have used the AAR for performance assessment. And yet, as Peter Senge notes, efforts to bring the practice into corporate culture most often fail because "again and again, people reduce the living practice of AARs to a sterile technique."

The process itself is an active discussion centered around four key questions:

1. What did we intend to accomplish (what was our strategy)?

2. What did we do (how did we execute relative to our strategy)?

3. Why did it happen that way (why was there a difference between strategy and execution)?

4. What will we do to adapt our strategy or refine our execution for a better outcome OR how do we repeat our success?

The AAR is not merely an opportunity to focus on team performance, but also serves as a catalyst for cultural change. To set the stage for effective AARs, leaders must first create a climate of transparency, selflessness, and candor where team members can challenge current ways of thinking and performing. Everyone—leaders included—must openly share where their own performance may have contributed to a team failure, and acknowledge the people and practices that helped create the team's success. Used regularly to assess successful and unsuccessful events, AARs will strengthen teams and improve performance, and can become ingrained into the DNA of the organization. When key learnings from AARs are shared, the experiences of one team can benefit the entire organization.

ACTION STEPS

Going through the motions of an AAR is relatively easy—putting AARs into the DNA of your organization is the challenge. The following steps will help to make AARs a "living practice" that can transform team and organizational performance.

1. **Schedule after-action reviews consistently to learn from both successes and failures.** "Post-mortems" have a negative connotation that discourages participation and enthusiasm. AARs should be held during or immediately after successful and non-successful events, using the positive positioning of improving your own performance and not that of someone else.

2. **Gather relevant facts and figures related to the team's performance.** If project deadlines have been missed, product standards are being ignored, or client feedback is disregarded in the team's execution, these facts set the foundation for an AAR that is grounded in relevant data.

3. **Make participation mandatory and involve all team members in the discussion**—even customers, partners, and suppliers can be included. Each participant will likely have a different perspective on the event, and this serves as a key input into the AAR. Everyone's voice is important, so you must be able to receive criticism from a few levels down. Open-ended questions that are related to specific standards or expectations will encourage involvement.

4. **Have a three-pronged focus: performance of team members, the leader, and the team as a whole.** Keeping the attention on facts and outcomes, what are the strengths and weaknesses of each? This focus keeps the discussion centered on what the team can control (as opposed to what is happening at headquarters or on another team).

5. **Follow the "rules of engagement."** To encourage honest participation and mutual trust, AARs must be: confidential (joint learning is shared, but individual comments are not), transparent, focused on individual and team improvement and development, and in preparation for "next time."

6. **Share learning across the organization.** Many organizations, including Huber and Microsoft, use databases or blogs to make the lessons of AARs available via intranet to all of their teams. It's inefficient to withhold key learnings from other teams and allow them to make the same mistakes or prevent them from replicating best practices.

HOW ORGANIZATIONS USE IT

The J.M. Huber Corporation uses AARs after every planned project and significant unplanned event. Their AAR discussion centers on what happened, why, and what should be done about it. Following the meeting, employees post their learnings to a database and an online after-action report is created, which includes action plans and lessons learned. Other employees around the world can search the database to find AARs on topics related to their work. Employees are motivated to participate with incentives such as the Chairman's Award for After Action Review (AAR) Excellence, which is given annually to a cross-functional team.

The strategy-consulting firm Jump Associates holds AAR-like debriefings after every client meeting. Employees, including top executives, give each other feedback, offering at least one positive example and one concrete suggestion about how to improve. On a smaller scale, CEO and founder Dev Patnaik debriefed after every meeting and every client interaction for six months. The debriefings gave Patnaik the feedback senior executives rarely get.

Although called "post-mortems," Microsoft's performance assessments have much in common with AARs. They are held at the end of every project, whether successful or not. General participation is garnered through discussions and ensuing reports, which are circulated to all participants through the intranet. Everyone is encouraged to comment. The reports are then open to all so that continuous learning and best practices are available to everyone in the organization.

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KNOWLEDGE IN ACTION: RELATED EXECUTIVE EDUCATION PROGRAMS

Todd Henshaw teaches after-action reviews in the *Advanced Management Program*.

ABOUT NANO TOOLS

Nano Tools for Leaders® was conceived and developed by Deb Giffen, MCC, Director of Innovative Learning Solutions at Wharton Executive Education. It is jointly sponsored by Wharton Executive Education and Wharton›s Center for Leadership and Change Management, Wharton Professor of Management Michael Useem, Director. Nano Tools Academic Director is Professor John Paul MacDuffie, Professor of Management at the Wharton School and Director of the Program on Vehicle and Mobility Innovation (PVMI) at Wharton›s Mack Institute for Innovation Management.