

THET 2013 ANNUAL CONFERENCE: LEARNING FROM EACH OTHER

AFTER ACTION REVIEWS

An After Action Review (AAR) is a simple process of group reflection for learning from experiences, with the goal of improving future performance. It is an opportunity for a team to reflect on a project, activity, event or task so that they can do better the next time. It can also be employed in the course of a project to learn while doing. (This introduction is adapted from the www.kstoolkit.org; more details and other perspectives are easy to find online.)

AARs at THET

In the last two years we have used AARs at THET to learn from and improve:

- Country partnership mid-term review processes;
- Our response to an emergency incident;
- The HPS grant selection process;
- Compilation of donor reports;
- Sharing, learning and training events.

How to do an AAR

- Hold the AAR immediately, whilst all of the participants are still available and their memories are fresh. Lessons can be applied right away.
- The ideal climate for a successful AAR is one of openness and commitment to learning, without regard to seniority and with no intention to blame or criticise individuals or to evaluate personal performance. Take thirty minutes for an AAR if you can't spare any more time, but an hour is usually better and reviews of complex experiences may benefit from two or three hours.
- An AAR needs someone to facilitate. Their role is to ensure that the group sticks more or less to the sequence of questions outlined below, and to make notes where everyone can see them. If the facilitator was involved in the work, they should also contribute to the discussion – but make clear to the group that at those moments they are being a participant.
- An AAR is a reflective brainstorm to answer a sequence of four questions (though [other frameworks](#) can be tried – search online for “2-5-1 Storytelling”). Discussion will naturally jump back and forth between the four questions but the facilitator should strongly encourage the group to answer the first and second questions fully before moving onto the third and fourth.
- The first question is **What was supposed to happen?** Make a detailed list. Participants should try to recall the original intentions and not edit them with the benefit of hindsight.
- The second question is **What actually happened?** Participants can mention anything that seems important to them, but the facilitator should make sure that for each answer to the first question there is a corresponding answer to the second question.
- Questions three and four compare the plan with reality. The group reflection and real learning begin as the team answers **Why were there differences?** and **What did we learn?** The facilitator should let the discussions play out as far as time allows before recording clear decisions and actions.
- It can be useful to keep all the notes from the AAR but the process itself is more important for learning, and the actions more important for improvement.

Pirates

The best thing about an AAR is that announcing one gives you the chance to sound like a pirate (old-school treasure style, not modern Horn of Africa style or counterfeit DVD style). AAAAAARRRRRR!

