

## Introduction to Before and After Action Reviews (BARs and AARs)

### What are Before and After Action Reviews?

The Before and After Action Review is a simple, straightforward set of questions to ask before and after an important piece of work — whether it is preparing for a meeting, engaging with board members or launching into a new initiative. While deceptively simple, these specific questions can have a profound impact on a group’s results. They help a group of people who together are responsible for succeeding at a piece of work to create a shared vision of what success would look like and strengthen their collective thinking to improve their ability to achieve results that matter.

You can think of a BAR and an AAR as “bookends” to a piece of action. Together, BARs and AARs use real work to build a group’s capacity to improve performance by comparing actual results with those intended, exploring the causes of those results, and applying the insights to the next opportunity to act. This practice, used repeatedly, improves a team’s ability to predict and address challenges in constantly changing environments.

**The primary purpose of the BAR** is to make sure that everyone in a group shares the same understanding of what we are trying to accomplish and how we would recognize success, and that everyone is actively thinking about how to achieve that — predicting challenges, and drawing on past lessons and good ideas.

A BAR is different from planning. It’s more like a sports team huddling before a play. It takes the plan on paper and asks, “so what is it *really* going to take to make this work?” And, like a sports huddle, it makes sure that everyone who has a role to play in making it a success is involved in thinking it through together.

**The primary purpose of the AAR** is to help a group consciously test and refine its thinking and actions in real-time, using actual results as a guide, while there is still time to correct course and improve the outcomes of a project or initiative.

The AAR asks a team to reflect honestly on their actual results compared to what they intended to achieve, and to talk, equally honestly, about what contributed to those results — both good news and bad news, so they can do better next time.

#### Before Action Review

What are our intended results?

What will success look like?

What challenges might we encounter?

What have we learned from similar situations?

What will make us successful this time?

When will we do an AAR?

#### After Action Review

What were our intended results?

What were our actual results?

What caused our results?

What will we sustain or improve?

What is our next opportunity to test what we learned?

When will we do our next BAR?



## When would we use a BAR or an AAR?

Because they are so simple, you can hold a BAR or an AAR around any piece of action, at any level, in just 30 minutes, with very little preparation.

Do a BAR anytime you are about to do something as a team that matters and you are not certain of your results. Do an AAR anytime you feel that you have something to learn from what just happened — whether it was a big victory or a disappointing result.

BARs and AARs are most powerful when done repeatedly around small, but important, pieces of work – strategy decisions, convenings, regular program activities, etc. Keeping BARs and AARs short and simple makes them fit-for-purpose. If the meeting or preparing for it becomes too burdensome, a group may experience one great AAR but resist committing to doing them on a regular basis.

Because they are so simple, BARs and AARs can be used across a network of partners working together on a shared goal. Having this practice in common gives everyone a shared learning language and sensibility.

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## The Basics: How to participate in a BAR or AAR conversation

Come to a BAR realizing that, regardless of your ‘seniority,’ everyone can play a role in creating a success. If you are being asked to do something and you don’t understand why, ask about the larger intent: “Help me understand how this will help us get to our larger goal.” When the group starts to think about what might go wrong (potential challenges), even if you are new to this particular team, you might have had an experience that could help all of you anticipate and prepare for an important challenge.

Come to an AAR with an open mind and heart. The AAR will ask a group to compare its actual results to its expected results. In the course of reflecting, a group is likely to discover small wins inside of a larger failure and, equally, small mistakes inside of a big win. The more willing you are to reflect honestly on your results and what might have contributed to them, the faster all of you can learn together.

If you are seen as a leader in this system, be the first person to speak up and say “here’s something I wish I had done differently.” That act of courage can make an immeasurable contribution to the whole team’s willingness to do this kind of learning.

And recognize that you won’t get it right the first time. As the commander of a unit of soldiers that created the AAR once told us: “Don’t expect a right answer from a single AAR. Most of what you identify in a single AAR is the wrong answers. It’s a complex task. So you go out and choose a different answer to the problem, and it’s wrong too, but maybe it’s less wrong. You’ve got to...take small bites, lots of them, over time, and they’ll work, eventually, to a complete solution to the problem.”

**Examples of BARs and AARs in Practice**

BARs and AARs can be used by everyone involved in a change initiative, at a strategic, implementation, or tactical level, as these actual examples illustrate. When actors in all these roles use them simultaneously to learn about their own work toward a shared goal, it creates a learning “ecosystem” where small results start to accumulate into a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts.

	<b>Foundation</b>	<b>Grantee/Nonprofit</b>	<b>Community</b>
<b>Strategy</b>	<p>An operating foundation holds multiple levels of BARs and AARs as part of an annual planning process — focused both on the process itself and learning from the past year of programs and grants to inform the year ahead.</p> <p>A foundation uses BARs and AARs to prepare and reflect on the ED’s conversation with the Board at each Board meeting to advance their thinking in alignment with what’s happening on the ground.</p>	<p>A nonprofit conducts BARs and AARs around a series of strategy sessions with local cohort sites as part of a larger economic opportunity initiative.</p> <p>Grantees conduct periodic BARs and AARs on the larger arc of their work so they can contribute new questions and insights to strategy conversations with their funder.</p>	<p>Multiple partners (grantees and funders) use BARs and AARs in a community-wide collaborative funding initiative to contribute to an ongoing learning practice among them so they can learn from each other, cross-pollinate and adjust through time.</p>
<b>Implementation</b>	<p>A program team uses BARs and AARs to improve the uptake of a series of evaluation dashboard meaning-making sessions with multiple program areas.</p> <p>A foundation uses BARs and AARs regularly in Line of Sight meetings to discover new opportunities and ensure alignment of implementation with strategic intent through time.</p>	<p>A nonprofit doing regional economic development advancement holds BARs and AARs for a series of annual site visits to county-level subgrantees.</p> <p>A funder collaborative structures the grant application and reporting as a BAR and AAR; allows the mid-engagement AARs to be the grantee’s application for the next round.</p>	<p>Communities meet periodically as a whole or in groups focused on critical parts of a community initiative in ‘learning summits,’ using BARs and AARs to prepare for the meeting and contribute insights to an EL Table.</p>
<b>Tactical</b>	<p>A foundation uses BARs and AARs to shift from in-person to virtual convenings (focused on learning at both a strategic and tactical).</p>	<p>Grantees use BARs and AARs to make rapid mid-course corrections to take advantage of emergent opportunities and track changes in thinking and results to report to their funders.</p>	<p>New community members are invited to review or observe BARs and/or AARs to onboard quickly and in real time, so they can seamlessly enter into current work.</p>

## Why We Ask These Questions

### Before Action Review Questions

**What are our intended results?** If a group does not say out loud, in advance, what it expects to achieve, it can call any result a success.

**What will success look like?** This creates a shared, tangible metric of success. These metrics might be quantitative (80 percent of participants are committed to a next action) or qualitative (we will leave with a clear idea of who will do what by when). The more concrete the answers, the easier it will be to compare intent with results during an AAR.

**What challenges might we encounter?** This is the last chance to get real—to use the group’s past experiences to predict what is likely to get in the way and plan for it. Are there predictable scheduling bottlenecks to plan for? Is there someone not at the BAR who needs to be contacted before the event?

**What have we learned from similar situations?** This is the time to consider lessons from past events or similar activities. The goal is to realistically plan for possible stumbling blocks and to identify one good idea to try. Consider this step a requirement. Asking this question ensures that groups do not learn the same lessons over and over again.

**What will make us successful this time?** Taking all you’ve said so far into account, what is the one thing the group could do to make the biggest difference in its results? Because the group will be conducting an AAR, it will have a perfect opportunity to ask itself, Did it work?

**When will we do an AAR?** It’s easy to leave this off the list of questions, but it may be the most important question! Get the AAR on the calendar now.

### After Action Review Questions

**What were our intended results?** Reminding group members about their intended result transforms the conversation from a discussion about fixing problems to a test of the group’s thinking. If group members did a BAR, they should need very little time to restate what they agreed to in advance. If a participant questions the intended result, don’t debate it at this stage; include the question in the discussion of causes.

**What were our actual results?** This question keeps the conversation honest. Be careful to ask the question exactly as it is written here.. People sometimes want to ask, “What happened and why?” Responding to that question can lead to rationalizations. Focus on how the actual results compare with the intended results. By doing this, you will also show that both success and failure are valid material for developing lessons. If the discussion drifts into the question of why results happened, defer that to the discussion about causes.

**What caused our results?** This is the heart of the conversation—for either unexpected success or disappointing outcomes. Depending on how much time is available, you can deeply explore the causes, or focus on top-of-mind highlights. Explore what part of the system or context contributed to the result. Sometimes the answer is that the group didn’t get a chance to test its thinking. This is not uncommon. Ask what got in the way.

**What will we sustain or improve?** Find the one to three most powerful insights or ideas that this group could use to improve its performance going forward. If the group struggles with this or its answers seem vague, group members can ask this powerful question: “If we could turn back the clock, what would we do differently?”

**What is our next opportunity to test what we have learned?** Before leaving the room, always identify the next opportunity to apply and deepen learning. A lesson is not learned until it is applied and the group gets better results, even in changing situations.

**When will we do our next BAR?** It is easy to forget to schedule the next BAR. Get it on the calendar now.

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