

CURRICULUM ON LEADERSHIP

Strand L5: Planning

Level 11

This Strand is composed of the following components:

- A. Planning Activities
- B. Conducting an After Action Review**
- C. Organizational and Strategic Planning



“ESSAYONS”

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B. Conducting an After Action Review

Objectives

DESIRED OUTCOME (Self-Mastery)

90% of Unit Cadets will be able to plan and conduct an After Action Review, and prepare a written AAR for continuity files.

1. Explain how an AAR fits into the planning process, and list the four questions that an AAR attempts to answer.
2. Describe what an AAR Plan covers, and what a facilitator must do to prepare to conduct an AAR.
3. Give some sample ground rules and discuss the major points an AAR must cover.
4. Write an After Action Report after a major CACC activity.

References:

Appendix G, FM 25-101, Battle Focused Training, 30 SEP 1990

Chapter 16, FM 6-0, Commander and Staff Organization and Operations, May 2014

Guide to the After Action Review, a VA document by Salem-Schatz, Ordin, & Mittman, Oct 2010

B1. What is an AAR?

An AAR is either an After Action Review or an After Action Report. The *review* is the process of analyzing the training or event; the *report* is the written record of the review.

An AAR is a review of training or operations that allows cadets, leaders, and commandants to discover for themselves what happened during the training and why. It is also used to solicit ideas on how the training could have been performed better. It is a professional discussion that includes the training participants and focuses on the training objectives and their linkage to the process of training cadets. Quality after action reviews help cadets receive better feedback on their performance and remember lessons longer.

AARs are not critiques because they do not determine success or failure; rather, AARs are professional discussions of training events. Leaders avoid lecturing participants on what went wrong. They use AARs to tell a story about what was planned, what happened during the training, why it happened, and what could have been done differently to improve performance.

Leaders guide discussions to bring out important learning points, preferably by the cadets and subordinate leaders themselves. Cadets learn much more when they identify for themselves what went right and wrong than when lessons are dictated. AARs:

- Reinforce and increase the learning that took place as a result of the training exercise.
- Identify and analyze both strengths and weaknesses.
- Involve all participants.
- Guide toward achieving objectives.
- Link lessons learned to subsequent training.

Organizations systematically collect, use, and share lessons learned and best practices. Lessons learned and best practices are saved for consideration by subsequent staffs when conducting similar training or events.

In the military, there are basically two types of AARs-- formal and informal. In the Cadet Corps, we'll pretty much focus only on informal AARs. The two are similar, but the formal AAR requires a lot more detailed planning, preparation, and resources. Informal AARs require less planning and preparation than formal AARs and are more suited to the needs of our cadet program. AARs in the Cadet Corps may be conducted within a battalion or brigade staff after a significant activity, or by the 10th Corps Staff after a state level event. They should be used to capture lessons learned and leave a record of what was done for the next time the unit conducts a similar activity.

An AAR is centered on four questions:

- What was expected to happen?
- What actually occurred?
- What went well and why?

- What can be improved and how?

An AAR features:

- An open and honest professional discussion
- Participation by everyone on the team
- A focus on results of an event or project
- Identification of ways to sustain what was done well
- Development of recommendations on ways to overcome obstacles

After action reviews are an excellent opportunity for use as multi-echelon leader development tools. Following a session involving all participants, commandants may continue after action reviews with selected cadet leaders as extended professional development discussions. These discussions usually include a more specific review of leader contributions to the operation's results. Commandants use this opportunity to help cadet leaders master current skills and prepare them for future responsibilities. After action reviews are opportunities for knowledge transfer through teaching, coaching, and mentoring.

B2. Planning and Preparing for an AAR

Leaders must plan and prepare before they can conduct an effective AAR. The plan specifies:

- Who will conduct the after action review
- Who will provide information
- Aspects of the operation the after action review should evaluate
- Who will attend the after action review
- When and where the after action review will occur
- Aids to be used for the after action review

Ideally, an AAR is conducted by a facilitator who was not involved in the execution of the event. A qualified facilitator can keep neutral when there are disagreements, and help a commander and his/her staff focus on the lessons learned, not on running the AAR. A commandant may be able to perform the role of facilitator if they are able to stay neutral. Otherwise, the event commander should facilitate the AAR.

Commanders or facilitators identify critical actions and events that must be covered in the AAR. Examples include the planning process, dissemination of information, preparation for the event, conduct of the event or training, and conclusion of the event. The after action review plan also includes who will address each event.

The AAR should be scheduled at the end of an event whenever possible. The AAR planner should decide the scope of the after action review and allocate sufficient time. If necessary, the AAR may need to take place during the next scheduled meeting the unit has available. For example, after a bivouac, the commander and staff may schedule a staff meeting after school during the following week to conduct the AAR. The 10th Corps Staff may need to wait for their next weekend drill assembly to conduct the AAR after an event. If time elapses between the event and the AAR, the participants should be encouraged to make notes about their experience so they keep their memory of the event fresh for the AAR.

The AAR plan specifies who the commander wants to attend the after action review. At each echelon, an after action review has a primary set of participants. At squad and platoon levels, all cadets should

attend and participate. At company and higher levels, it may not be practical to have everyone attend. In this case, unit commanders, other unit leaders, and other key players may be the only participants. Appropriate aids add to an after action review's effectiveness; however, facilitators use an aid only if it makes the after action review better. Aids should promote learning and directly support discussion of the operation. Dry-erase boards, video equipment, terrain models, enlarged maps, and unit information systems are all worthwhile under the right conditions. Terrain visibility, group size, suitability for the task, and availability of electric power are all considerations when selecting AAR aids.

Preparation is key to effectively executing any plan. Commanders begin to prepare for an AAR before the event. They schedule the AAR before the activity, and announce to participants the date, time and location as soon as possible after these are set.

The facilitator reviews the event's mission and goals before the AAR. The mission's objectives form the after action review's focus and the basis for observations. The facilitator reviews current regulations regarding the event, read and understand all warning orders (WARNORDs), OPORDs, and FRAGORDs issued before and during execution to understand what the commander wanted to happen. The detailed knowledge that facilitators display as a result of these reviews gives added credibility to their comments.

The facilitator (again, it may be the commander) pays particular attention during all phases of the event to issues that need to be raised during the AAR. A huge part of their preparation for the AAR is having notes on how planning proceeded, preparation for the event, and conduct of the event itself. Once the facilitator has gathered all available information, they organize their notes chronologically to understand the flow of events. They select and sequence key events in terms of their relevance to the unit's mission and objectives. This helps them identify key discussion and teaching points.

An effective after action review leads participants to discover strengths and weaknesses, propose solutions, and adopt a course of action to improve future operations. The most effective method for conducting an AAR is following a chronological order of events. This is logical, structured, and easy to understand. Covering actions in the order they occurred helps cadets and leaders better recall what happened. This process needs to include a look at staff functions and how they affected the event.

The AAR may be organized as follows:

- Introduction.
- Presentation of commander's plan (*Answers What was supposed to happen?*)
- Summary of key events (*Answers What actually occurred?*)
- Discussion of key issues (includes *What went well* and *What can be improved*)
- Discussion of training to sustain or improve (*answers How to improve*)
- Conclusion.

Facilitator tips

- Give participants a couple of minutes to think about and perhaps write down their ideas before anyone speaks.
- To get maximum participation from the group, try going around the room to give everyone a chance to speak or asking quieter members for their ideas first.
- Ask participants to be specific in their statements and avoid generalizations.
- Summarize or repeat back to the group often
- Focus on the facts. Feelings need to be acknowledged, but future recommendations have to be based on agreed facts.

B3. Conducting After Action Reviews

Facilitators start an after action review by reviewing its purpose and sequence: the ground rules, the objectives, and a summary of the operation that emphasizes the functions or events to be covered. This ensures that everyone present understands what the commander expects the AAR to accomplish.

Sample ground rules for an AAR

- Active participation: it is important for everyone to participate
- Everyone's views have equal value
- No blame
- There are no right or wrong answers
- Be open to new ideas
- Be creative in proposing solutions to barriers
- "Yes....and" rather than "either/or" thinking
- Consensus where possible, clarification where not
- Commitment to identifying opportunities for improvement and recommending possible improvement approaches
- No record of the discussion will be distributed without the agreement of all participants
- Quotes will not be attributed to individuals without permission

These rules should be established at the beginning of the AAR and agreed upon by all participants. It is appropriate to add or remove rules at the recommendation of participants, if the majority agree.

Introduction

The following aspects apply to all after action reviews. Facilitators emphasize them in their introduction.

- An after action review is a dynamic, candid, professional discussion that focuses on unit performance. Everyone with an insight, observation, or question participates. Total participation is necessary to maintain unit strengths and to identify and correct deficiencies.
- An after action review is not a critique. No one—regardless of rank, position, or strength of personality—has all the information or answers. After action reviews maximize learning benefits by allowing cadets to learn from each other.
- An after action review assesses weaknesses to improve and strengths to sustain.

Cadet participation is directly related to the atmosphere created during the introduction. Effective facilitators draw in cadets who seem reluctant to participate. The following ideas can help create an atmosphere conducive to maximum participation:

- Reinforce the idea that it is permissible to disagree.
- Focus on learning and encourage cadets to give honest opinions.
- Use open-ended and leading questions to guide the discussion.
- Facilitators enter the discussion only when necessary.

Review of Objectives and Intent

After the introduction, the facilitator reviews the AAR's objectives. This review includes the following:

- A restatement of the events, themes, or issues being reviewed.
- The mission and commander's intent (what was supposed to happen).

The commander or a facilitator restates the mission and commander's intent. Facilitators may guide the discussion to ensure that everyone present understands the plan and intent. Another method is to have subordinate leaders restate the mission and discuss the commander's intent. Maps, terrain boards, and other aids can help portray this information.

What was supposed to happen?

Start by asking what the unit originally set out to do. Begin with the OPORD or other planning documents. Encourage details. You probably want to go through these same questions for each phase of the operation (i.e. Planning, Preparation, Execution). Some prompts that may be useful include:

- What was the purpose and objectives?
- Who was the audience?
- What was the initial timeline?
- Who was involved?
- What outcomes and outputs were intended?
- What products were to be produced?
- What problems were expected, and did you overcome them?

Summary of Events (What Happened)

The facilitator guides the review, using the chronological method to describe and discuss what actually happened. Again, address each phase of the operation separately. Facilitators avoid asking yes-or-no questions. They encourage participation and guide the discussion by using open-ended and leading questions. Open-ended questions allow those answering to reply based on what they think is significant. These questions are less likely to put cadets on the defensive. Open-ended questions work more effectively in finding out what happened.

As the discussion expands and more cadets add their perspectives, what really happened becomes clearer. Facilitators do not tell cadets and leaders what was good or bad. Instead, they ensure that the discussion reveals the important issues, both positive and negative. Facilitators may want to expand this discussion and ask, "What could have been done differently?" Skillful guiding of the discussion ensures that participants do not gloss over mistakes or weaknesses.

The AAR process involves several leader functions requiring skill, training, and good judgment. Leaders observe performance, then evaluate the quality of what they see. They decide which of their observations to include in the AAR and what questions to ask. They ask open ended questions to ensure the discussion causes cadets to evaluate their own performance. AARs tend to treat poor performance in great detail and focus on what happened and why. Trainers try not to unduly damage self-esteem or cohesion. To do so would be contrary to the AAR's goal of improving performance. By the end of the AAR, cadets must clearly understand what was good, bad, and average about their performance. The art of the after action review process is to get cadets to accurately grade their own performance. Self-rendered grading will be more meaningful than a judgment issued by the trainer or AAR leader.

However, cadets must *know* where they stand. Thus, in some cases, the leader may need to clearly dictate (tell the participants) his findings.

Many times the discussion must focus on leader mistakes. This discussion should be frank, but without embarrassing leaders involved. The positive must be emphasized so that lessons can be learned without destroying confidence or respect. The AAR leader should ask the leader why he chose a particular course of action or what influenced him; others can learn from a mistake and gain an appreciation for the difficulties involved in leading. Perhaps some key information was missing because a subordinate leader or cadet didn't think it was important. Unit members must be reminded that in time they too will become leaders, so they must learn to make decisions.

Ask, "What went well and why?"

Always start with the good points. Ask, "What were the successful steps taken towards achieving your objective?" or "What went really well in the project?" We should be seeking to build on best practice as much as we can, and identifying strategies to ensure that successful practices are built in to future work and repeated.

During this segment, "bad" points as well as "good" will be raised. Try not to pass judgment - it will stifle participation. Let everyone be heard and move on to the next participant or topic. If time is short, a good approach is to ask people what they thought had the greatest impact on the success they achieved. If this has already been covered, ask them to choose the next most important factor.

Ask, "What can be improved, and how?"

Identify the stumbling blocks and pitfalls, so they can be avoided in the future. The following prompts may be useful:

- Given the information and knowledge we had at the time, what could we have done better?
- Given the information and knowledge we have now, what are we going to do differently in similar situations in the future to ensure success?
- What would your advice be to future planners based on your experiences here?

When trying to identify the root cause for a problem or something that didn't go well, ask "why?" several times. It is important that discussions of stumbling blocks not become witch-hunts or finger pointing exercises. It is okay to let people have their say, but you may have to keep pulling them back from the problems of the past to ask "so what would you do differently next time?"

Closing Comments (Summary)

During the summary, facilitators review and summarize key points identified during the discussion. The after action review should end on a positive note, linking conclusions to learning and possible training.

Making an AAR Successful.

An AAR needs to be **an open and honest professional discussion, with participation by everyone on the team**. Its aim is to improve training or operations – not to place blame. If participants hold back, it may affect the success of the AAR. The facilitator's role is to get participants – ALL participants – to open up and share relevant thoughts. This can be difficult for junior cadets when senior cadets are there, but the facilitator ensures that everyone's opinion can be heard and counts. Sometimes senior

cadets or commandants have no idea what happened at the junior level, and they'll never know if they don't ask and listen to the cadets who were present for the training.

During an AAR, the facilitator ensures there is a **focus on results** of an event or project. It's important not to get caught up in what could have happened. If numerical or specific information is available on the results of the training or event, they should be presented in the AAR, as they help focus on the results.

Finally, the AAR discusses **ways to sustain what was done well**, and the development of recommendations on **ways to overcome obstacles**. It's important to capture these ideas and ensure they are included in the After Action Report, since it's likely people won't remember them in preparing for the next activity if they're not recorded. Often, it's key to jump on ideas that will improve an event but require a long lead time. For example, if you have ideas on how to improve the scoresheets at a drill competition, make the changes right after the drill comp and publish them. If you wait until you're planning next year's drill comp, you'll probably find that you are too late to make the changes, and they'll never be made.

B4. The After Action Report

One of the most important collection techniques used in the Cadet Corps and many other organizations is the after action *report*. The concept of the after action report can be easily adapted to fit any unit's lessons learned program.

The after action report provides observations and insights from the lessons learned that allow the unit to reflect on the successes and shortcomings of the operation, and share these lessons with cadet leaders of the next generation.

The reporting unit organizes the after action report in a logical order, usually by operational phase or staff function. It should be arranged chronologically when doing so facilitates the understanding and flow of the information reported. Documenting what worked well should receive as much attention as what did not.

The following is an example of what a commander and staff may elect to cover in their unit’s written after action report.

After Action Report
<p>1. Report Cover Page</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. <i>Preparing headquarters or organization.</i> b. <i>Location of report preparation.</i> c. <i>Date of preparation.</i> d. <i>After action report title.</i> e. <i>Period covered: (date to date).</i>
<p>2. Preface or foreword signed by the commander.</p>
<p>3. Executive summary and chronology of significant events:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. <i>Briefly summarize operations for all phases; include key dates for each phase starting with initial planning, transitioning through the activity itself, and ending with post-activity actions.</i> b. <i>Summarize task organization.</i> c. <i>Summarize key lessons learned</i> d. <i>Summarize recommendations with timeline for correction to occur</i>
<p>4. Planning phase with dates:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. <i>Staff’s planning focus:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Describe how the planning was coordinated and conducted.</i> ▪ <i>Did the staff have all of the elements that it would use at the event during the preparation?</i> ▪ <i>What assets outside the unit were used to support training?</i> b. <i>Discuss lessons learned during planning operations. What was intended but not completed?</i> c. <i>Discuss logistics and personnel shortages, if appropriate.</i> d. <i>Describe any major shifts in personnel or manning.</i> e. <i>What were the significant gaps identified in leader development or proficiency?</i>
<p>5. Preparation phase with dates:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. <i>Summarize preparation operations.</i> b. <i>Discuss what portions of the preparation process went as planned and what worked.</i> c. <i>What were the shortcomings and delays in the preparation? Why did these occur?</i>
<p>6. Operations phase with dates:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. <i>Summarize how the event was conducted</i> b. <i>List of key operation orders (OPORDs) and fragmentary orders (FRAGORDs).</i> c. <i>What went well and why?</i> d. <i>What can be improved and how?</i>
<p>7. Distribution (of this report).</p>
<p>8. Appendixes (as appropriate):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. <i>Applicable maps.</i> b. <i>Scoresheets used.</i> c. <i>Training Schedules</i> d. <i>Copies of key OPORDs and FRAGORDs.</i> e. <i>Particularly useful staff products developed.</i>