

# After-Action Reviews-Can They Be Used Effectively For Learning Purposes?

Ed Moffat

## Introduction

After-action reviews (AARs) also known by other terms, are a detailed critical summary of a past event conducted and documented for the purpose of re-assessing decisions and considering alternatives for future reference. The Emergency Management Division (EMD) of the Justice Institute of BC is interested in determining how after-action reviews are conducted in Canada following disasters including rationale for these processes. The information gathered on after-action reviews in this study will be utilized to support further research on this topic as well as support curriculum development in the JIBC Certificate of Emergency Management program.

## Background

The utilization of after-action reviews began over 40 years ago by the US military, and are now being used by those responsible for emergency preparedness and response to convey important lessons learned to promote individual and organizational learning post event(s). With the number of disaster events increasing along with the complexity and magnitude of such events, how can after-action reviews be performed in a timely fashion to convey lessons learned and implemented for improving response in the next event.

## Methods

Research into this paper was to review existing peer reviewed literature on after-action reviews firstly from a Canadian perspective. The research was expanded to include peer reviewed literature from the US as well as Australia as they have similar experiences with emergency management as well as literature from a variety of disaster events such as Hurricane Katrina (2005), BP Oil Spill (2010) and Wildland-Urban fires.

## Results/Findings

After-action reviews are known by many other names depending on which organization is performing them and this may be confusing. Some of the names include after-action reviews, after-action reports, debrief, critiques, post-mortems as well as huddles and hot-washes. Within Canada, the lessons learned approach are the experiences gained during an event or exercise that are collected, and the mistakes are highlighted as lessons. For emergency preparedness, the lessons learned approach stands on the assumption that learning from experience, whether it be our own or others, and whether it be from real events or simulations, improves practice and minimizes avoidable deaths and negative economic and social consequences of disasters (Savoia, Agboola & Biddinger, 2012). After-action reviews are valuable when utilized by organizations to learn but the learnings may not be practiced regularly and the lesson learned from the completed AARs are not distributed or implemented effectively (Kaliner, 2013). Performing AARs is vital to the success for future events. As such it is important that those facilitating the process are trained and competent to lead participants through stimulating and open discussions that reflect on the planned goals, successes as well as areas needed for improvement from the current event for future events. There are no standardized policies surrounding after-action reviews and the requirement for collection, analysis, sharing and archiving the information (Friesen, Kelsey & Legere, 2017).

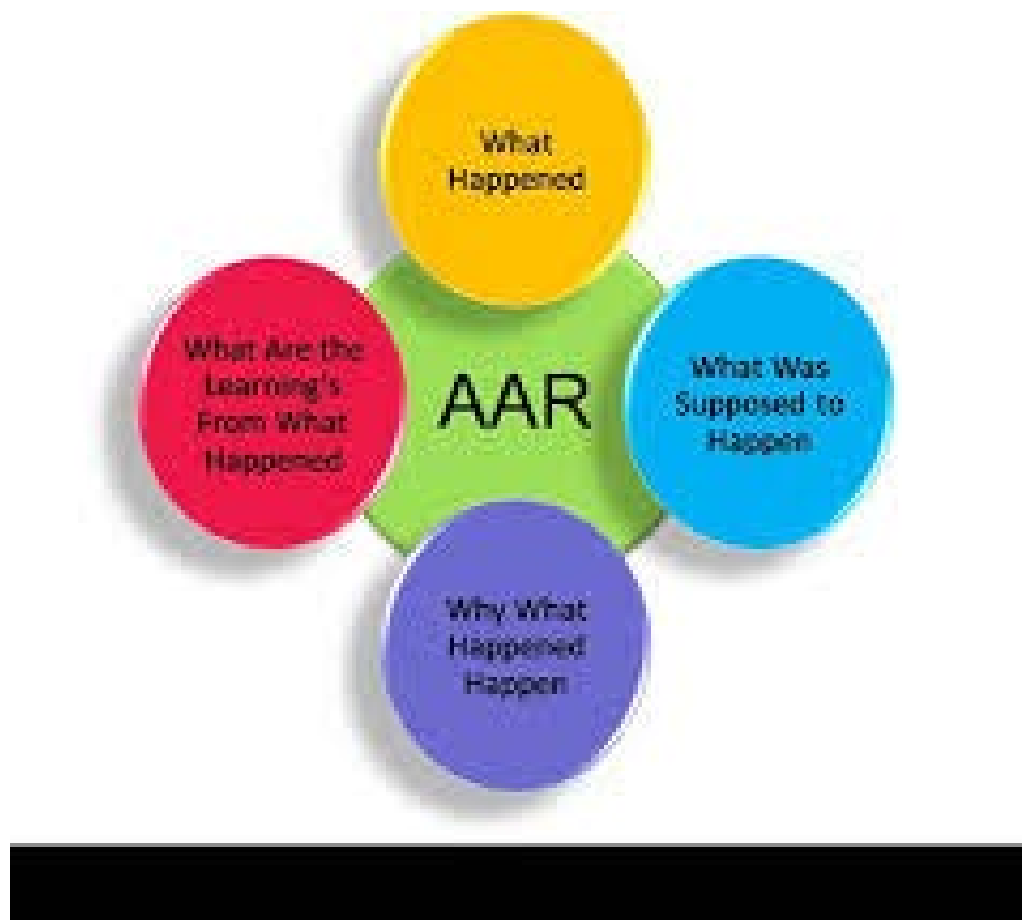


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## Discussion

After-action reviews were first introduced by the US Military over 40 years ago to improve learning capabilities after an event as well as improve performance. It is important to understand the role of the after-action review so that emergency managers can implement new strategies and solutions to previously identified problems to continue being prepared and adapting to what are normally fast changing situations.

The main purpose of performing after-action reviews is to identify what changes should be implemented in order to improve future responses (Girard et al., 2014). An effective after-action review needs to be conducted by a strong leader who can create open, honest and safe environments in which people can speak honestly and with confidence; AARs should not be undertaken to simply fix problems or allocate blame (Cronin & Andrews, 2009). Many organizations repeat the same issues over and over again as they have not adopted the recommended lessons learned from previous events. If lessons learned are not being adopted into new policies, procedures or response plans then the effectiveness of the whole process needs to be further researched to determine why.

## Conclusions or Recommendations

Once an after-action review is conducted they are able to convey lessons-learned, however, the AAR is not being utilized to its full extent and those responsible for emergency management are doomed to repeat the same challenges over and over again disaster after disaster. Although after-action reviews have been around for over 40 years the current practice may not lead to increased individual or organizational improved practice. This is concerning as AARs and the usage of such documents can lead to improvements in planning and response to events. Existing research is spread across a broad spectrum of research fields, each with its own varying findings. It is necessary for emergency management to further explore after-action reviews to determine the best methods of conducting and reporting as well as when and how they should be performed to improve overall response to events so that identified issues are not re-occurring time and time again.

## References

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