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Emergency Management After-Action Review Processes to Influence Ontario Municipalities

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Introduction

The after-action review (AAR) is a cost effective and simple process that allows emergency management professionals to understand and improve their organizations. Organizational agility and learning from lessons play an important role in enhancing emergency management programs and the AAR facilitates this process. This research discusses the role of the Office of the Fire Marshal and Emergency Management Ontario (OFMEM) and how it can better encourage the standardized use of the AAR by municipalities in Ontario.

Background

The AAR process is an important one that allows organizations and municipalities to address organizational limitations, enhance strengths, and to learn from experiences. The AAR is designed to promote employee and team development and is founded on several areas of science, including information feedback, performance measurement, cognition and memory, group processes, communications theory, and instructional science (Tannenbaum & Cerasoli, 2013). The AAR is a structured opportunity for a shared retrospective learning, innovative development, and continuous improvement (Scott, Dunn, Williams, & Allen, 2015). Despite the encouragement found in emergency management literature, there is no governance that mandates municipalities in Ontario to record or address lessons learned from AAR's after an incident or an exercise. Therefore, what literature is available to assist the OFMEM when making AAR process suggestions to municipalities in Ontario?

Methods

A literary review was completed through multiple electronic database searches. Questionnaires were sent to multiple Ontario Emergency Management professionals. The information collected from the questionnaires was compared to the information collected from the literature and the template provided at the OFMEM.

Results/Findings

From the survey questionnaires, it was found that each municipalities utilized a different template for their respective AAR's. However, the processes did use the same steps in a different order. Each municipality process included background information and overview, event chronology, recommendations, and conclusions. This paper discusses the essential elements that should be included in a comprehensive AAR process, which include integrating into culture, best practices, active learning, and reflective learning. For any developmental interventions to work, lessons learned must be integrated into everyday practice (Tannenbaum & Cerasoli, 2013). The AAR process and methodology provide a base in which to inform decisions, guide emergency management plans, strengthen mitigation and prevention strategies, and assist in the development of tools for response to real operations and exercises (Friesen et al., 2017). Building this framework will assist to prevent mistakes from being made in the future building of a structure to learn from experiences that focus on challenges (Darling & Parry, 2001).

Table:
Debriefs: Essential Elements.

TABLE 1: Debriefs: Essential Elements

Element	Definition	Excludes
Active self-learning	Participants engage in some form of self-discovery or active involvement and are not merely passive recipients	Passive receipt of feedback; being told how to improve by a coach or facilitator
Developmental intent	A clear, primary intent for improvement or learning that is nonpunitive rather than judgmental or administrative	Performance appraisals or reviews; incidental learning
Specific events	Involves reflection on specific events or performance episodes rather than general performance or competencies	General discussion of a team's or person's overall strengths/ weaknesses; 360° feedback about overall competencies
Multiple information sources	Includes input from multiple team members or from a focal participant and at least one external source, such as an observer or objective data source	Personal diary keeping; self-reflection

(Tannenbaum & Cerasoli, 2013, p.233).

Discussion

Tannenbaum and Cerasoli (2013) have found that the use of individual and team debriefs have the potential to increase up to 25% improvements through proper structure and facilitation. The essential elements of an AAR are relatively inexpensive and can be a quick intervention for enhancing performance (Tannenbaum and Cerasoli, 2013). It is critical the AAR process be integrated into the culture of the organization (Brock et al., 2009; Darling & Parry, 2001), and supported by senior leadership and employees alike. The best AAR's follow a well-defined path, where timing and discussion points are pre-determined (Garvin, 2000). Reflective learning is a product of the AAR, as it provides the opportunity for both individuals and groups to engage in a multi-dimensional learning activity which allows continuous improvement (Bolton, 2016; Brock et al., 2009; Friesen et al., 2017; Tannenbaum & Cerasoli, 2013). For any developmental interventions to work, lessons learned must be integrated into everyday practice (Tannenbaum & Cerasoli, 2013). The AAR process and methodology provide a base in which to inform decisions, guide emergency management plans, strengthen mitigation and prevention strategies, and assist in the development of tools for response to real operations and exercises (Friesen et al., 2017). Building this framework will assist to prevent mistakes from being made in the future building of a structure to learn from experiences that focus on challenges (Darling & Parry, 2001).

Conclusions or Recommendations

Organizational capacity can be expanded by implementing a comprehensive and well-developed lessons learned program following incidents or disaster exercises, known as the after-action review. According to Tannenbaum and Cerasoli (2013), organizations can improve performance up to 25% by using properly conducted after-action reviews. This inexpensive process can deliver great results if completed properly. The benefits of the AAR are found to enhance strengths, address limitations and learn from experiences within organizations. These benefits should be maximized to ensure municipalities are completing their due diligence within their communities. The OFMEM may play a large part of the AAR process that municipalities choose to use within their emergency management divisions to promote active and reflective learning.

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