

Leaders Conducting After-Action Reviews Often Deliver Substandard Feedback

Issue

Recent feedback from the field indicates there is a problem in the current state of after-action reviews (AARs). Namely, far, far too many of them are not meeting the standard. Substandard AARs can occur in any training media — live, virtual, and constructive — and at all levels, from platoon to brigade. Research confirms that the principles and techniques laid out in *TC 25-20, A Leader's Guide to After-Action Reviews*, are sound, but that leaders conducting the AAR are not effective in their delivery, nor do they adequately address the key learning points of the training event. The only way to correct this is to increase awareness of the problem and to train even more completely our AAR facilitators. New emphasis from the training base at the Armor Center and all leaders of the armored force in the field must be focused on exploiting the learning opportunity of every AAR. This article will address some of the AAR deficiencies currently being found, as well as offer a solution to improve them.

State of AARs Today

We find more inexperienced and junior leaders guiding others into and through the AAR process than ever before. This is no one's fault; but across the force, we have less experience at almost every tactical position. Our trainers themselves just don't have as many training events under their belts as was once common. So, many of our young leaders have understandably not been adequately trained in proper AAR facilitator techniques. Some merely go through the sequences of events and detail who shot whom on replays, instead of learning to discuss all facets of the two or three lessons to be learned from that training iteration. And when the appropriate lessons are correctly identified, far too often there is little to no discussion of how to improve unit/leader performance. This is necessarily the next step after issue identification, but many facilitators are simply not adept at taking the discussion toward correcting the newly identified problem.



When O/Cs tell war stories and anecdotes at an AAR, instead of getting the unit members to discuss their own performances, soldiers don't get the benefit intended.

If the trainers/facilitators do happen to be leaders with some degree of experience, too often they dominate the discussions with their own “war stories” and anecdotes. They are the wrong folks to be talking at center stage during the AAR. The leader running the AAR should be only a facilitator, not a player. High quality, effective AARs usually follow when the facilitator gets the leaders of the unit being trained talking about their experiences, the experiences that they were living just a couple of hours or minutes before, rather than recounting his or her own unit's past battle successes.

One key change in AARs conducted in the virtual training environment, according to research, is that *they oftentimes occur immediately after the conclusion of the training event*, sometimes as quickly as 10 to 15 minutes. Not only is this a very short time to adequately prepare for an AAR, but many facilitators are simply not aware of how to effectively utilize the multitude of AAR products which can be gained in simulations.

Another problem with simulation-based training events is that the O/Cs are not part of a full-time O/C team, but instead part of a pick-up team hastily pulled to-

gether for one training event. These “part-timers” are often unfamiliar with the intricacies of the simulation systems and are generally no more experienced than those undergoing the training. Moreover, they have even less knowledge about data collection methods and receive little training prior to the event.

Finally, AAR facilitators are not receiving feedback from their supervisors on their performance. Specifically, these leaders need constructive criticism of their own effectiveness during the AAR as well as suggestions on how to improve their delivery. Unfortunately, due to the multi-echelon nature of our training events and subsequent “tiered” AAR schedule, many supervisors are unable to observe their subordinate's AARs, as they are busy preparing for their own AARs. This leaves improvement of that junior leader to pure chance, to occur without the benefit of feedback from a more experienced observer. And without this feedback, these leaders grow more comfortable over time with their own performance, even though they are not reaching their full potential. Additionally, the unit leaders in the AAR are not learning all the lessons they could with a better-trained facilitator.

Training, Certification and Supervision of the AAR Leader

Anecdotal as well as researched evidence indicates that units are entering the CTCs at lower levels of training competence than was the case a few years ago. This situation requires our O/Cs — AAR leaders all — to be more mature and well-qualified in order to maximize the learning potential of every training event. The only way to address this is to train even more completely our AAR leaders. But how can this be accomplished? How do we train our leaders to be great AAR facilitators?

Fortunately, there are several tools available to help train the leader or trainer in proper AAR standards. To begin, our training doctrinal manuals *FM 25-100, Training the Force*, and *FM 25-101, Battle Focused Training*, emphasize the importance of quality feedback and self-discovery during AARs. Of course, *TC 25-20, A Leader's Guide to After-Action Reviews*, is our Army's main source for how to conduct AARs and provides leaders with the essential information on preparing and conducting AARs in all types of training environments (live, virtual and constructive). There is also a videotape that has been produced to help our junior leaders entitled "Platoon/Company Preparing for the AAR." This 1-1/4-hour-long tape was produced by the Joint Readiness Training Center and is an excellent vehicle to prepare new O/Cs and AAR facilitators.

These manuals and videotape serve to provide the leader with the philosophy behind the AARs as well as suggestions on how to guide the discussion and how to ask thought-provoking questions. Unfortunately, these guides do not provide the requisite communication skills that a leader must develop to stimulate the audience. They also do not tell the facilitator how to capitalize on various AAR products which can help the unit discover what went right or wrong during their training, nor do they explain how to guide these leaders in developing solutions for how to improve unit performance. These skills can only be learned through an effective training program that totally prepares the O/C or facilitator to orchestrate a successful AAR. Such a program is described on page 5-6 of *FM 25-101*. Briefly, it specifies that leaders must first be subject matter experts, tactically and technically qualified in the required doctrine, knowledgeable on the unit's training objectives, as well as being well-versed in rehearsals, safety, OPFOR tactics, O/C duties, and ROE.

So, how does a junior leader acquire the skills to conduct an AAR, and how long does it take to acquire them? And, who is responsible to ensure that the leader is prepared to conduct an AAR? The answer to these questions may vary from unit to unit. An O/C team at one of the CTCs, under the supervision of a senior O/C, will generally conduct a comprehensive certification program. New O/Cs are required to first observe several AARs, then to conduct several "rehearsal" AARs in front of more experienced O/Cs, and finally to conduct a few AARs under the watchful eye of another O/C. This process is very time-consuming, lasting possibly an entire rotation. The results, however, are generally a well qualified, confident, and polished AAR facilitator.

Commanders of tactical units, on the other hand, may not have the time to conduct such a detailed program. Instead, they often conduct a specifically focused train-up for the leaders in their unit that will be tasked to perform O/C duties. This training will often focus on arming the O/Cs with the MTP checklists and the specific doctrinal background required for the upcoming event. Additionally, training objectives and the overall concept for the training is generally provided. Unfortunately, actual training to prepare leaders to conduct AARs is not provided, and the result is often less than effective AARs, especially at subordinate levels — squad, platoon, and company. Again due to the multi-echelon nature of training, AARs are generally tiered and thus conducted without an immediate supervisor present to provide feedback. This is totally unacceptable for the development of the leader and to the long term training of Army units.

To correct this, all commanders and leaders must ensure their subordinates are fully trained to conduct AARs before they are ever allowed to perform this extremely important duty. Selection should not be left to chance or be based on an individual's reputation within the unit. Fact is, there are many great soldiers who have a wealth of experience in training, but that does not necessarily make them capable of conducting an effective AAR. Commanders must recognize this, and ensure that any subordinate tasked to conduct AARs is properly trained, adequately resourced, and well rehearsed.

The commander's responsibility does not end here. AAR facilitators, whether new or experienced, must have continuous feedback if they are to reach their full potential. And since many soldiers will be required to conduct AARs throughout

their careers, it is extremely important that they receive developmental feedback on their performance as early and as often as possible.

Without a doubt, feedback by a supervisor/leader is invaluable, not only to the maintenance of quality AARs within a unit, but also to the continued professional growth of the facilitator.

If "tiered" AAR scheduling prevents the supervisor from attending the AAR, an effective tool is to videotape it for later viewing with the facilitator. This has proved to be a very effective vehicle for coaching various AAR techniques.

AAR Preparation

Leaders must ensure their subordinates are capable of organizing the myriad of tasks required for an effective AAR. Being organized is a critical skill of the AAR facilitator. There is generally an incredible amount of information to absorb, collate, and analyze. Much of this can be made easier through an effective observation plan, developed before the training event and modified as the training event unfolds. Guiding subordinate observer/controllers toward suspected problem areas helps focus the collection effort that will provide the required feedback needed for a successful AAR. Once the mission is completed, facilitators need to ensure enough time is available to adequately prepare and rehearse for the AAR. Preparation is truly a key to any successful AAR.

Availability of training aids and AAR production materials ensures a quality appearing product, which in turn promotes increased professional behavior and performance by the trained unit. If they feel and see the effort being undertaken on their behalf, they will respond with increased levels of performance and come to the AARs with the open minds necessary to move to the next level. Training aids for an AAR may vary from the rather low-tech butcher paper to the more high-tech PowerPoint slide show with accompanying video footage and communication cuts. And depending on the specific learning point to be made, high-tech may not be any more effective in helping the learning process. The facilitator must simply decide what training aid will work best to get the point across.

Facilitators must also determine the type of AAR that will work best. Our AAR "how-to" manuals provide guidance for many different types of AARs. They may be formal or informal and may be struc-

tured to focus on different issues, depending on the lessons to be discussed. Some AARs focus on the "Plan, Prep, and Execute" aspects of the training. Another AAR may focus on the "Key Events/Key Issues" of the exercise. Still another AAR may focus on the "Sustainment and Improvement of Battlefield Operating Systems (BOS)." These AARs generally proceed in a chronological sequence of the major events of the training in order to provide a logical sequence for the training audience. Regardless of the technique employed, however, AARs must address what happened, what was done right or wrong, and how to do it better next time. This is not an easy task, especially for a less experienced AAR facilitator.

Key tasks for the facilitator in preparing for the AAR include:

- Understand what happened during the event.
- Determine the key issues (good and bad). Then determine the causes that led to the issue. Must understand the "cause and effect" relationship of what happened and why it happened.
- Decide the key issues, events, or themes the AAR will focus on.
- Know the doctrine in depth that supports the key issues of the event.
- Think through TTPs and doctrine that help improve weaknesses or sustain strengths.
- Consider how the participants view what happened and why it happened. This is helpful in anticipating their responses and questions during the AAR.
- Again, determine the method for conducting the AAR:
 - Chronological order. This technique is the most basic and follows the flow of training from start to finish.
 - Key events/themes/issues. This intermediate technique focuses on specific issues observed during the training.
 - Operating systems. This advanced technique presents issues by each operating system for all phases of the training.
 - Combination. The AAR leader may use a combination of these techniques; however, it usually takes too much time.
- Finally, prepare the AAR site and audio-visual aids. REHEARSE.

Conduct the AAR

It is important that the AAR be conducted at a facility that will allow effective learning to take place. Distractions must be minimized and attendees should be arranged so they can talk to each other. Unfortunately, many of our "fixed" AAR sites have the attendees facing center stage, directly where the facilitator is located. A better arrangement is to have the chairs arranged in an arc or V-shape so unit leaders may better interact with each other. The AAR facilitator can then be off to a flank where he can guide the group's discussion and not be the central focus of attention. Instead, center stage should be a sand table, butcher board, screen, or other training aid being used to bring out teaching points.

Training Circular 25-20 outlines a good format to follow for an AAR, no matter the echelon. This format gives the facilitator a methodical way of presenting a great deal of information. Soldiers have grown comfortable with this format and now have this expectation of how information will be presented at the AAR. They generally know the rules for the AAR, and little time needs to be taken for this topic. Of course, the content will vary greatly from a platoon-level AAR to that information presented at a brigade combat team AAR. However, the method of presenting the lessons and the journey of discovery each unit takes is quite similar. (One note: due to the time limits of an AAR, the facilitator must determine the focus, be it on key issues or battlefield operating systems. There will generally not be time to cover the myriad of data available for each item listed below.)

Each item in the sequence at right can mean different things to each facilitator. Below is a detailed discussion of the sequential steps for conducting an AAR, based on the collective experience of the Armor Center. NOTE: Each step is in accordance with *TC 25-20, A Leader's Guide To After-Action Reviews*, dated September 1993.

1. Introduction and rules. The introduction should include the following thoughts:

- An AAR is a dynamic, candid, professional discussion of training which focuses on unit

performance against the Army standard for the tasks being trained.

- An AAR is not a critique. The key difference is the AAR centers on the unit working through the process. A critique focuses on the evaluator providing the answers.
- Everyone participates. No one, regardless of rank or strength of personality, has all the answers.
- An AAR does not grade success or failure. There are always weaknesses to improve and strengths to sustain. There are doctrinal principles to follow, but there is no "right" answer.
- Again, keep this short in order to quickly get to the major issues.

2. Review of objectives and intent.

- Training objectives.
- Commander's mission, intent, and concept of operations (what was supposed to happen).
- OPFOR commander's mission, intent, and concept of operations. Use the OPFOR commander, if available.

AAR SEQUENCE

Introduction and Rules (briefly)

Review of Objectives and Intent

Training objectives

Commander's Mission/Intent (what was supposed to happen)

Opposing Forces (OPFOR) Commander's Mission/Intent

Relevant Doctrine/Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures (TTPs)

Summary of Recent Events (what happened)

Discussion of Key Issues

Chronological Order of Events

Battlefield Operating Systems (BOS)

Key Events/Themes/Issues

Discussion of Optional Issues

Soldier/Leader Skills

Tasks to Sustain/Improve

Statistics

Others

Discussion of Force Protection (Safety)

Closing Comments (Summary)

- Relevant doctrine and TTPs.

3. Summary of events (what happened). After the commander and OPFOR commander explain what they wanted to happen, the AAR facilitator reviews what actually happened. The level of sophistication will necessarily vary depending on the domain in which the training was conducted and available training devices. For instance, audio-visual aids are very useful and the virtual (SIMNET and COFT) and constructive (JANUS and BBS) simulators provide tremendous support in this area in the shortest amount of time.

- Live training may have a summary of events as simple as a series of sketches or as sophisticated as a seven-minute videotape used at CTCs.
- Most constructive simulations have playback capability. The AAR facilitator, with assistance from a system technician, can develop summaries which play back an engagement at “hyper-speed” to allow the participants to see enemy and friendly actions during an engagement.
- Virtual simulations normally have playback and built-in AAR capabilities which expedite preparation of AARs and take-home packages. Again, the facilitator should coordinate with the virtual simulation technical staff to help prepare the AAR.
- Conduct-of-Fire Trainer (COFT) capabilities are well known.
- Simulation Networking (SIMNET) supports historical playbacks during or after the exercise. It automates preparation of candidate “stand-alone” AAR aids and displays. It plays back voice communications and top-down displays. It provides complete AAR presentation at the end of an exercise. It also supports the review, deletion or modification of aids and displays for the AAR presentation. Units can be provided a take-home video.
- Janus can replay a complete scenario or selected events like sensor detection, unit positions, movement, direct-fire engagements, force attrition, artillery impacts, and obstacle effects. Janus can show single units throughout the battle or general battle actions.
- Brigade/Battalion Battle Simulation (BBS) collects and presents data from BBS in “near real time,” allowing instant evaluation of exercise performance. Features include video replay, printed reports, map and text slides, and slide shows through the on-screen slide

capability. The video replay portion of the AAR produces standard BBS map and overlay graphics for a snapshot (one battlefield event) or animation (a series of snapshots based on a user-selected time interval). These views can be modified by user-selected “filtering.”

- With the advent of digital systems comes even more mechanisms to collect feedback for later playback that will greatly enhance discovery learning at AARs.

4. Discussion of key issues. This step is a discussion of key learning points using one of the four methods discussed previously: chronological order, operating systems, key events/themes/issues or combination. Effective AAR products are essential to clearly demonstrate to unit leaders what went right and what went wrong. The better the products, the greater the potential for learning to take place. All key observations must be supported by doctrinally based discussions, leaving no room for opinions by the facilitator or unit leaders. By the end of this discussion, unit leaders must clearly understand whether MTP standards and/or unit training objectives were met or not, as well as recognize the reasons why or why not. Key guidelines include:

- Ask leading questions that facilitate self-discovery and learning by all participants. If the AAR facilitator gives statements rather than asks questions, he is probably wrong.
- Avoid open-ended questions. Be specific and do not generalize.
- Once an issue and its causes are identified, help the participants determine HOW TO IMPROVE. Relate the solution back to doctrine, TTPs, or their SOPs. Do not leave an issue until the participants develop a solution. Be specific in the details of how to fix weaknesses or sustain strengths. “You must determine and show what right is!”
- Do not dwell on issues unrelated to mission accomplishment.
- Guide the direction of the AAR through questions and answers.
- As issues are resolved, summarize the solutions.
- The AAR should highlight positive issues and strengths: strengths to sustain and weaknesses to improve, always ending the session positively on strengths.
- Relate performance to the accomplishment of training objectives.

5. Discussion of optional issues. The following optional issues may be discussed as part of the AAR.

- Soldier/leader skills.
- Tasks to sustain/improve.
- Statistics.

6. Discussion of force protection (safety). It is extremely important to discuss any and all safety related concerns of the unit or as identified by the O/C team.

7. Closing comments (summary). Prior to ending the AAR, it is important to summarize the key areas which require additional focus before the next iteration or training opportunity. Unit leaders generally have a good idea on what they need to work on, and a good technique is to ask them before they depart the AAR. Finally, leave the AAR on a positive note, linking conclusions to future training. After this, the facilitator should leave the immediate area to allow the unit leaders and soldiers time to discuss the just completed AAR and its implications in private.

Conclusion.

It is imperative that the AAR leader undergo a rigorous training program prior to being given the responsibility of leading a unit through its AAR discovery learning process. This training should be made part of the standard professional development or leader certification program as found in many units today. Once trained, however, it is imperative for facilitators to receive continual feedback from their supervisors. Such a mentoring program will go a long way in improving AARs and the professional development of each facilitator.

Our Army’s AAR procedure is sound; we have proven it over and over again. To revitalize it requires a renewed commitment and a willingness of senior leaders force-wide to provide the resources necessary to train our AAR facilitators to be the best that they can be. We welcome comments on the above from anyone interested in the subject, and hope to generate further thinking and writings on this important subject that deserves our attention.

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