

This document is an extract of a document published by the Tear Fund (<http://www.tearfund.org.nz/>) on processes for Learning Before, During and After

Introduction

When we have a project or piece of work to do, we can increase the value of learning and experience by consciously taking time before, during and after, to learn who may have done this before and how we may be able to help future colleagues. This forms part of a process to help an organization, 'know what it knows', so that knowledge and experience can be re-used quickly and easily.

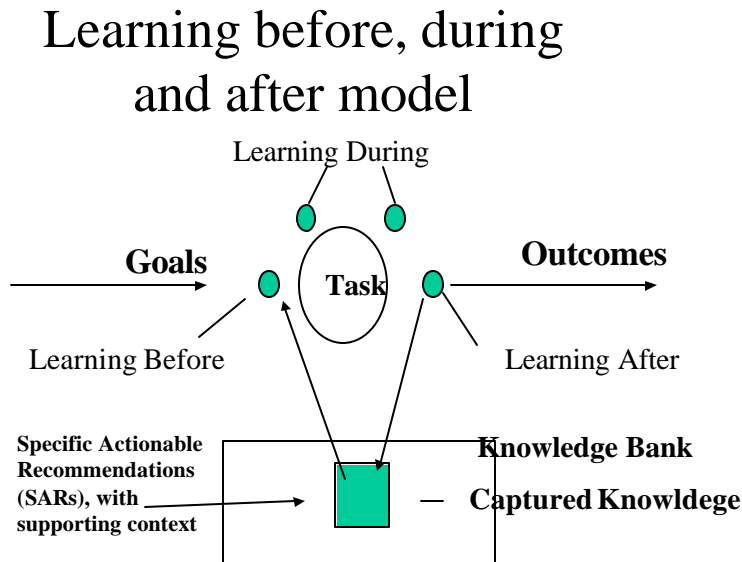
This document gives some simple processes on how to do this.

Learning Before, During and After

We aspire to get to a place where we:

- a. **Learn Before** - Before we tackle any sizeable project we ask ourselves who has done it before, and what can we learn from them?
- b. **Learn During** - At intervals during the project we pause, check we are on course and ask what have we learnt?

c. **Learn After** - At the end of the project , we take time to stop and capture our learning and present it in a way that a future user could find it and re-use it. Diagram:



In an AAL program, we have the following processes:

Learning Before: **'Peer Assist'**

Learning During: **'After Action Review'**

Learning After: **'Learning Review'**

These processes of Peer Assist, After Action Review, Learning Review and Interviewing are outlined in the following pages. At the end is an outline of what may be placed inside a **Knowledge Bank**.

The Specific Actionable Recommendation (SAR)

Some of the tools described here are aimed at outputting Specific Actionable Recommendations (SARs). This is because the Learning processes are tailored to bring out the learning in a form which is:

1. Specific (ie clear, crisp and precise not woolly or vague);

2. Actionable (ie something that can be done - not a vague principle);
3. Recommendation (ie future oriented - for use by future individuals or teams)

Ideally, all SARs should be accompanied by a quote to humanise it and to show where more support can be obtained.

Example of something that is not an SAR:

We had good communication

Example of something that is an SAR:

You need to have a planning meeting within a week of the disaster first beginning, inviting all COG group members, to plan 8 weeks ahead on issues of funding and accountabilities. ('That early planning meeting was the bedrock for us in that crisis' (Joe Bloggs x1234)).

Learning Before - The Peer Assist

Taking time to learn from others before we begin

A Peer Assist is a meeting or a workshop where people are invited from other teams to share their experience, insights and knowledge with a team who have requested some help. It is appropriate when the cost of gathering the help brings significant potential benefits to a team or project that is facing a challenge that others may be able to bring help to. It is appropriate when the diversity of views external to the team or project can broaden the range of options considered.

You may consider holding a Peer Assist when for example:

- your team is about to respond to a crisis similar to one that another team responded to last year;
- you are new to a role, about to tackle something difficult, and you are aware that others have done it before;
- you haven't done something for a while, and you are not sure how things and processes have moved on.

A Peer Assist does the following:

- Targets a specific technical or commercial challenge;
- Gains assistance and insight from people outside the team;
- Identifies possible approaches and new lines of inquiry;
 - Promotes sharing of learning with each other;
 - Develops strong networks among staff.

Hold your Peer Assist early enough to make a difference

The word **assist** is important - this meeting is to help you; not to pick up on your mistakes in your planning.

Another key word is **peers** : the people the same level as you; your mates and colleagues. This is not about global experts or top brass - it is finding people who have 'done this sort of thing before' and who can come and share what they know.

Both teams learn from the effort; the assisting team returns home with a broader knowledge base...and the inviting team is able to use the lessons learned.

Steps in running a Peer Assist:

1. Plan the PA early to make use of the help to deliver your outcome. (The PA is not just a step in the approval process, it is also very effective in planning and delivery stages too);
2. Share your plans for Peer Assists with others. They may have similar needs and you can share the design;
3. Be clear in articulating the problem or challenge you are asking the group to help with, and the objective of the Assist. (Be prepared for these to be reframed in the course of the event. Give the team context via briefing material);
4. Assemble a group tailored to the objectives of the Assist with diverse skills and experience, people who will both challenge your mental models and offer options and new lines of inquiry. Consider inviting people from other disciplines, businesses and organisations;
5. In participating in a PA, your role is to offer help, knowledge and experience and reduce the workload, not to criticise and add to the workload;

6. Design the event with time to build the PA team early.
7. Recommend what the host team should stop doing as well as extra they might do;
8. Prepare an action list at the end of the meeting. Share progress against this with the participants afterwards.
9. Get each participant to consider what they have learned and will apply from the event.
10. Consider who else might benefit from the lessons learned and share them. Provide contact names for follow up discussions.

Learning During - After Action Review (AAR)

Short-term knowledge capture for an operational team

The idea for the AAR is that we can run it after every piece of activity - every day, shift or other significant action

Do it immediately, before you leave the job

This process saves a lot of time and money.

Often, people see problems coming,
but won't say anything because it's not their job
and no-one asks - this AAR process lets those things out

The AAR is about:

- Short-term, small team;
- By the team, for the team;
- Takes about 15 minutes;
- Makes learning conscious;
- Can make learning explicit;
- Builds trust

Why do we do AARs? - To learn from today to work smarter tomorrow

What do we review? - The piece of work just completed

Who is involved? - The team (plus a facilitator if required) and no-one else

When do we do one? - Immediately after the work is finished

Where do we do it? - At the workplace

How do we do one? - Read on!

The After Action Review process is shaped around 4 questions:

1. What was supposed to happen?

- What was the objective of the piece of work?
- Was there a clear objective?
- Was it measurable?
- Does everyone agree? Maybe there were different understandings.
- You could try asking people to write down what they thought the objective was

2. What actually happened?

- What was the result?
- Was it measurable?
- Does everyone agree? What is 'ground truth'?
- You are not looking for blame or praise. This is not finger pointing.
- It will help if there was some sort of record of the proceedings.

3. What were the positive and negative factors here?

- Was there a difference between supposed and actual?
- Did you do better/worse than expected?
- What helped the success, or caused the failure?
- You may need to question quite deeply to find out the facts. Ask the '5 why's'

(Note: The '5 whys' are in response to the theory that you need to ask 'why' a maximum of five times to find out the real tangible reason behind something. If the repeated asking of the question 'why' is causing irritation, re-phrase as 'what were the reasons for....' instead).

4. What have we learned?

- This is where you express the learning of what you will do in the future - **specific actionable recommendations (SARs)**.
- If any actions arise, make sure they are adopted.

The above is the basic AAR process. What do you do with the lessons?

- participants make notes for themselves
- facilitator makes notes of things learned for future collation (eg at the end of project learning review)
- pass any things learned on to other teams
- make sure the participants can see that their learning is having an effect.

Some After Action Review Rules

- Openness, not hiding
- Leaders and led on equal footing
- Learning, not blame or evaluation
- Everyone involved takes part
- No outsiders
- Real issues, not 'the time the tea arrived'

Learning After - The Learning Review

Longer-term knowledge capture for an operational team

Learning Reviews are team meetings, called after the completion of a piece of work, which have the objective of capturing the lessons learned during the project - for the benefit of future teams. Keys to a successful Review are to involve all key members of the team, to do it soon after the end of the project, to make sure that the outcome is forward-looking for future users of the lessons (ie, 'what would we recommend future project teams did?')

It is important that the meeting is carefully facilitated by a trained facilitator. If you are running a Learning Review for the first time, it is important to read the additional notes in the appendix of this document and also if possible seek advice and guidance from someone who has facilitated one before.

What is the Learning Review about?

- Longer - term, small team (min 2 persons, max around 30 persons)
- An end-of-project event
- Facilitated
- Takes about 20 minutes per team member
- Makes learning conscious and explicit
- Allows closure

Why do we do it? - So future teams can do their work better

What do we review? - The project just completed

Who takes part? - The team, their customer, a facilitator, and future knowledge users

When is it done? - Immediately after the project

Where is it done? - Anywhere. Offsite? In the bar?

How do we do one? - Read on!

Preparing for a Learning Review

Send out appropriate pre-reading (see detailed guide)

Call a meeting (do it face to face if possible)

Ensure the key players will be there

Speak with the team leader - ask him / her to find the key bits of documentation

If the customer's attendance is not appropriate, try and get them to give some input on the result

Position it as a celebration?

Start the meeting by re-iterating the purpose: this is not to assign blame or praise but to ensure future projects go even better than this one.

Make sure you have some way to record what is said.

The process is based around 5 questions:

Questions 1 and 2

Q1 What was the Objective of the project?

- Try and find the original terms of reference and measurables
- Circulate these before the meeting
- Were there any unstated objectives?

Q2 What did we achieve?

- Were deliverables delivered?
- Were deadlines met?

- Was the customer happy?
- At this point it could also be worth charting the process (find out what actually happened)

Question 3 Start with the Positives

- What went well in this project?
 - Successful steps towards meeting the objective
 - Ask everyone to take 2 minutes and write down 3 things they identify as a success (they may wish to take a minute or two to discuss this with their neighbour)
 - Then go round the table and ask them to read them out

You use this as a lead-in to a questioning process:

- Why did this bit go well?
- What did you do to ensure it went well?
- How can we ensure future projects go just as well?
- If I were a future project leader, what would you advise me?

Some 'bad' points will almost certainly emerge. Don't try and stifle this, let the discussion continue as far as consensus allows and then return to the next person's success factor.

Question 4 - Now for the Downsides

What could (with hindsight) have gone better?

- Pitfalls, things that held us back
- Ask everyone to take 2 minutes to write down the 3 things they identify as a disappointment
- Then go round the table and ask them to read them out.

You use this as a lead-in to a questioning process:

- What happened to make this sub-optimal?
- What was missing that meant this happened?
- How can we ensure that future projects go better?
- If I were a future project leader, what would you advise me?

Don't let the loud people dominate

A key product from the process of questions 4 and 5 are Specific Actionable Recommendations (SARs) for future use by teams on similar projects. Ideally, each should come with an identified quote to add human flavor and color.

Question 5

Looking back over the history of this project, how satisfied do you feel with the way it went?

- Ask everyone to mentally give their satisfaction rating 'marks out of 10'
- Then go round the table and ask them to call out their rating.
- This is a closure exercise; closure for the meeting and for the individuals
- You can question people further ("What would have made it a perfect 10 for you?"), or question the anomalies
- It can be appropriate to ask for 2 ratings; one for the product and one for the process.

Output from the Learning Review

the output is turned into a **Knowledge Asset** (see last section of this guide).

It is important that those who took part in the Learning Review can check their quotes before the outcomes are published.

For more information and guidelines, see the detailed guide to running an effective Learning Review in Appendix to this document

Storing Knowledge for future use

The Knowledge Asset

The Knowledge Bank

Knowledge we have gained can be stored in a **Knowledge Bank**

- we can deposit and withdraw from the bank when we require
- the knowledge and learning needs to be stored and organised systematically so that it can easily be re-found by others

It is helpful to divide the stored knowledge into separate **Knowledge Assets**, each of which is owned by an individual.

It can also be very powerful if each Knowledge Asset is the main 'meeting point' and learning capture point for a Community of Practice.

Into the Knowledge Asset will typically be stored:

- Specific Actionable Recommendations (SARs) from each Learning
- SARs turned into Guidelines for the future
- History from the projects to illustrate the guidelines
- Names and contact details of the people involved
- Any other key artifacts and raw data in support of the project (detailed plans, supporting papers, tapes etc)

The knowledge asset needs to have associated key words so that it can be found easily, or at least stored in a framework to aid recovery.

For example, there may be a Knowledge Asset on Flood Response, owned by Joe Bloggs.

On the front page there would be:

- the SARs listed from each Flood Response project;
- a list of names and contact details for each project;
- a set of Guidelines, updated each time a project shows that they can be improved.

For each project, all the support data would be stored behind the SARs and Guidelines (such as detailed plans, reports, budgets etc)

Appendix A

More background on running the Learning Review

Learning Reviews are team meetings, called after completion of a piece of work, which have the objective of capturing the lessons learnt during the project for the benefit of future teams.

Process:

1. Call a Meeting

- Don't try and conduct a Learning capture by email; it needs to be a round the table meeting. If you are concerned that people will not be open, then you may also need to conduct one-on-one interviews.
- Hold the meeting as soon as you can after the project ends; ideally within a couple of weeks. Memories fade if you leave it much longer and events become 'post-rationalised'.
- Ideally however you may have to set up a system whereby activity is observed and lessons are captured 'on the job'. Make sure that someone circulates any already-collated lessons prior to the meeting.
- The time set aside will depend on the number of people, the duration and the complexity of the project. A short, simple, small piece of work can be covered in 30 minutes to an hour. A 10 person 6 month project may need 4 hours or more. A complex alliance between several companies may need 2 days. Basically, the same approach can be applied at any scale.
- As a rule of thumb, allow 20 minutes per person, or 30 minutes if it was a long, contentious or complex project.
- A big Learning Review could be positioned as a celebration.

- Make sure all materials (eg post-it notes) are available.

2. Invite the Right People

- The project leader needs to attend, as do the project customer / sponsor / client and key members of the project team. If a similar project is due to start, or is already underway, then there is great value in the new project team attending, so the knowledge can be transferred as soon as it has surfaced.
- However - think through the practicalities (eg, would the sponsor have time to attend the whole thing??)
- Ask the project leader / coordinator / manager to schedule the meeting. He or she has the most ownership, knows who needs to attend and still probably retains some influence in the project team.
- In the call to attendees, announce that the purpose of the meeting is to **make future projects run more smoothly, by identifying learning points from this project.**

3. Appoint a Facilitator

- You will need a facilitator who was not closely involved in the project, otherwise the meeting will concentrate on 'what we did' rather than 'what should the next team do in similar circumstances.'
- If the facilitator is REALLY remote from the project, she or he may need to do some preparation (eg discussion with key players).
- The facilitator should also be outside the line-management structure, and the meeting needs to be clearly separate from any personal performance assessment.

Facilitator notes:

- make sure that the team own the meeting, it is their meeting not the facilitator's so be prepared to compromise over meeting structure if necessary.
- start the meeting by reiterating the purpose; this is not to assign blame or praise but to ensure that future projects go even better than this one.
- you need to set an atmosphere of openness; if necessary you can introduce 'rules of the game'.
- in a big meeting, ask someone to take notes for you, including verbatim record of key quotes and sound-bites.
- in a large group, ask people to introduce themselves and their role. Name tags would help.

4. Start by re-visiting the objectives, deliverables and measurables of the project

- This is the point at which you ask, ‘what did we set out to do?’ and ‘what did we really achieve?’
- The facilitator may want to ask the customer ‘did you get what you wanted?’
- It is then valuable to ask if the deadlines were met, and the satisfaction measures achieved.

Facilitator notes:

- Try and find the original ‘criteria for success’ to check whether the project delivered these.
- You can ask for original definitions of timescale, cost, resourcing.

5. It can be beneficial to revisit the project plan or process

- In long or complex projects, it is good to revisit the project plan, compare it with what actually happened, and identify any ‘missings’ from the plan
- Some facilitators like to construct, with the team, a flow chart of what happened, identifying tasks, deliverables and decision points
- In this way, you can identify those parts of the project which experienced delays or were completed ahead of time, those parts which were particularly efficient or inefficient, and those parts where the team were unclear over what really went on.
- This step is unnecessary in a short, simple project where the history is clear to all present.

Facilitator’s notes:

- For a long and complex project, where people are beginning to forget what happened, you could get the team to construct a flow chart of the process; what happened, what were the tasks, deliverables, decision points.
- This is also useful to do in a new or ground-breaking project, where there is no standard process
- You then have a framework to review what the ideal process should have been.

6. Next, ask ‘what went well?’ (in the context of delivering the objectives)

- Always start with the good points! We should be seeking to build on best practice as we are seeking to avoid recent mistakes.

- Ask, 'what were the successful steps towards achieving your objective?' 'What went really well in the project?'

- If time is short, a good ground rule is, 'Give me your greatest success factor, the one that made the biggest difference. If someone has already covered it, choose your second greatest'.

Facilitator's Notes:

- Go round the room checking each individual for their successes. Don't let the loud ones dominate the meeting; it is important that everyone is asked and heard. You may need to give them 2 minutes thinking time to write down what their successes were.

- It may be good to start with the project leader; he or she is likely to have the best insight into details of the project.

7. Find out why these aspects went well, and express the learning as advice for the future

- We are getting to the meat of the meeting now. Identify the success factors, so they can be repeated in the future.

- Try and deal with the facts. Feelings need to be acknowledged, but future recommendations need to be based on agreed facts.

- Ask, 'how can we ensure future projects go just as well, or even better?'

- Ask, 'what would your advice be to future project teams, based on your success here?'

Facilitator's notes:

- This part of the meeting will be a conversation. You have two options: the first is to ask the probing questions (and let the conversation develop) as each person identifies their success factor(s). The idea is to reach group consensus advice through conversation. In a close team this will happen naturally.

- An alternative approach, useful if the team is more subdued, is to identify all the issues first, then choose the ones to work on as a team.

- Almost certainly, as discussion continues, 'bad' points as well as good will be discussed. Don't try and stifle this, let the discussion continue as far as consensus allows, then return to the next person's success factor. Asking for success factors is just a way to get the topics into the room, and should not be used to stifle discussion if the negatives creep in.

- Your main task as facilitator will be to keep pressing for specific actionable recommendations.

8. Then ask, ‘what could have gone better’ (in the context of delivering the objectives)

- There are bound to be some areas where things could have gone better, where pitfalls were identified too late, and where process was sub-optimal.
- Ask, ‘What were the aspects that stopped you delivering even more?’

Facilitator’s notes:

- Again, go round the room and ask each individual. If you are concerned about openness, start with the team leader, whom you have already asked to set the tone by being open. If he / she admits that things could have gone better, the rest of the team will open up too.

9. Find out what the difficulties were.

- Identify the stumbling blocks and pitfalls, so they can be avoided in future. The following questions are 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 project teams, based on your experiences here?’

Facilitator’s notes:

- You have to ensure that this section of the process doesn’t become a witch-hunt or a finger pointing exercise. It is OK to let people have their say, but you will have to keep pulling them back from the problems of the past to ask, ‘so what would you do next time?’
- It might even be worth writing this on a flipchart: ‘So what about next time?’ to remind people of the focus of the meeting.
- Again, you have the option to hold the discussion as each person identifies their points, or to collect the points and choose which to discuss.

10. Make sure the participants leave the meeting with their feelings acknowledged.

- You do not want anyone to leave the meeting feeling that things were covered up, or that valuable effort was not acknowledged.
- Access to this can be achieved by asking people for a numerical rating of the project. Ask, ‘Looking back, how satisfied are you with this project; marks out of 10?’. Many people will say, ‘the project was fine, no problems’ and still give it 8 out of 10. This enables you to ask, ‘what would have made it a 10 for you?’
- The numerical rating also is a good way to sum up what may have been a roller-coaster meeting.

Facilitator’s notes:

-Sometimes, when an excellent result has been achieved at the expense of excessively hard work, chaos or conflict, it is good to review Result and Process separately; 'How satisfied are you with the result? How satisfied are you with the process?'

It is worth giving people 5 seconds thinking time and then to write down their scores before asking them to call it out, so that they are not influenced by other people's ratings.

11. What Next?

- If the project team is going straight on to a similar project, it is useful to follow the Learning Review with a planning session.

Facilitator's notes:

- If the previous project went badly, it will be worth reminding the team that they will need to **act** on the knowledge they have just uncovered, if they want future projects to run more smoothly. Ideally, they should embed the knowledge into revised team processes, procedures or structure.

- Press for people to take action, particularly on the big and difficult issues!

12. Recording the Meeting.

- The main output from the Learning Review is a Performance History. This needs to contain:

- Guidelines for the future, based around Specific Actionable Recommendations
- History from the project to illustrate the guidelines
- Names of the people involved, for future reference
- Any key artifacts

This determines what you need to record from the meeting.

First, try and get the gist of what people said, in their own words. You can either type (or write) quickly or use a tape recorder. Selected quotes will be useful for illustrating the performance history.

Also record as accurately as possible what the recommendations for the future are. Often the recommendations won't be clearly stated in the meeting, and the facilitator will need to do some re-wording of the meeting records. Express the recommendations as clearly, measurably and unambiguously as possible. Ask yourself, 'if I was the next project leader, would this lesson be any use to me?'. Ask, 'do they pass the Delia Smith test?' (Delia Smith is a British author of cookery books renowned for their clear and easy-to-use instructions).

Another outcome of the meeting will be short term actions for the team. Make sure someone on the team captures and owns these.

Make sure you circulate the write-up around the participants for comment. Make sure nobody was mis-quoted, and that the facilitator's wording of the lessons really reflects the views of the team.

Look for a home for the recommendations. Make sure they are put somewhere that future teams can find them (eg on the Intranet). Is there a Community of Practice that can own them and build them into a Knowledge Asset?