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Suggestions for After Action Review Facilitators

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SUGGESTIONS FOR AFTER ACTION REVIEW FACILITATORS

Introduction

One of the most basic tenets for trainers and educators is that providing feedback to the trainee about his performance is critical if learning is to occur and performance is to improve. The After Action Review (AAR) is the means established to provide this necessary feedback to participants in Army training events. The AAR is defined in FM 25-100 as "a method of providing feedback to units by involving participants in the training diagnostic process in order to increase and reinforce learning." The purpose of this paper is to discuss the AAR within the context of a computer-driven command post training event, and specifically, to address the following questions:

- Who should attend the AAR?
- What should the AAR contain?
- What should be the frequency of the AARs in a command post exercise.
- How should the AAR be compiled and presented?
- Should the AAR use preformatted products or templates?
- Should the content of the AAR be event type presentations or process type presentations, or both?
- Should the AAR be multi-echelon or single echelon?
- Should the AAR focus on a single battlefield operating system (BOS) or multiple BOSs?

Who Should Attend the AAR?

As a minimum, all members of the designated training audience for any training event should attend an AAR. Additionally, any supporting personnel, such as representatives from the OPFOR, the unit's support staff, primary and special staff members from echelons above and below the training unit who provide support for the command post exercise (CPX), should be present at the AARs if possible to provide clarification and input from their perspectives. In those cases where observer/controllers (O/Cs) provide observations that feed the AAR, they should either lead the AAR or be present to provide data and support when the AAR is conducted by the unit commander.

The above mentioned group of attendees would be quite large at echelons above Brigade and practicality dictates that the AAR leader determine how to slice this into smaller groups with only key training audience members physically present for any AAR, with other peripheral trainees observing through closed-circuit monitors or some other means.

What Should the AAR Contain?

Training doctrine (FM 25-100) specifies that an AAR should have four components: (1) Establish what happened, (2) determine what was right or wrong about what happened, (3) determine how the task should be done differently the next time, and (4) perform the task again. Although the final component (perform the task again) is good training philosophy, it provides no input to the actual AAR and will not be discussed except to note that an opportunity should be provided for repetition of the task, when possible, in order to practice the lessons learned in the AAR. The three remaining components will be addressed separately with suggestions for content within each.

Establish What Happened

A review of the unit's mission and training objectives is an essential starting point for a discussion of what actually happened during the exercise. The training objectives should be referred to frequently so that the training audience is able to make the necessary mental connections between the feedback received during the AAR and the training objectives. A brief review of both friendly and enemy actions and results should be discussed early in the AAR to set the stage for the analysis of performance which follows. Whenever possible, an OPFOR representative should provide the training audience with a **brief description of the enemy plan of action** during the exercise and explain how friendly actions impacted upon their plan.

Determine What Was Right or Wrong About What Happened

Performance of training objectives to standard can be viewed as the goal of the training audience, and the feedback during the AAR should help them determine whether they have achieved their goal. A discussion of the events, or processes, of the training exercise will help establish the **specific behaviors** which contributed to the success, or failure, in achieving the goal. The degree to which there is an explicit basis for any comments or suggestions affects the degree to which the recipient will accept the feedback as legitimate. Feedback messages containing vague or general statements should be avoided. The inclusion of specific incidents, behaviors, etc. aids the training audience in understanding the reasons for the feedback and provides a basis for making the necessary changes to improve performance, and also makes the feedback harder to deny or reject. Also, information on **type, extent and direction** of errors, when available and appropriate, will help trainees focus efforts in future training opportunities. Although **normative** data is rarely available currently, the ability to provide it should be built into the next generation of computer exercise drivers. This will provide members of the training audience with information concerning how well their tasks have been performed in relation to

¹Normative data - The average or typical performance of a large group of people or units who have performed the task previously.

how well others have performed them, as well as a historical picture on how well they performed the tasks in previous attempts. This will provide a valuable "bench mark" against which to judge performance and improvement.

Although Army training doctrine stresses that AARs should be **discussions** wherein the training audience is led to uncover their own **strengths and weaknesses**, this doesn't always happen either because of lack of time or lack of insight. It is the AAR facilitator's responsibility to assess the areas where the training audience needs to make improvements. If these points are not made through the training audience's discussion then the facilitator must make the assessment and provide specific evidence.

The AAR facilitator must keep in mind that in many Army training events individual tasks as well as team (collective) tasks are being trained. There may be instances in which the team mission will be satisfactorily accomplished in spite of weak performance of an individual. Providing feedback only on team tasks and processes as a whole may reinforce inappropriate performance by individuals. Therefore, the training audience must receive information which will allow them to assess both their **individual** performance as well as the performance of the **group** as a whole. Going around the room and having individual members of the training audience state where they believe they need to sustain or improve performance is not sufficient. The process is boring to all except the person speaking at any given moment and does not engage the group in a discussion of group processes. However, the notion of sustain - improve points to a key ingredient : when an AAR is finished, the trainees should each know what their **strengths** were as well as their **weaknesses**.

Determine How the Task Should be Done Differently Next Time

This is an extremely important part of the content of an AAR. Knowing what went wrong is little help in improving performance if the trainee does not know how to do it better. Insight into methods to improve performance may come from the training audience themselves. However, this will not always be the case and the AAR facilitator should be prepared to help with this, either drawing on his knowledge as a subject matter expert or from his experience in observing methods which have worked well for other units.

How Frequently Should AARs Be Presented?

AARs should be conducted at the **completion of each exercise**, or at **logical breakpoints** within an exercise, such as at the end of each day or upon change of mission. It is important that the training audience be able to relate the feedback to specific incidents or behaviors. This becomes more difficult as time elapses between the behaviors and the AAR. The passing of time also increases the probability that other activities and distractions will intervene and interfere with memory of the relevant behaviors. As a rule of thumb, an AAR should be provided as soon as possible without disrupting the flow of the exercise, but trainees should never proceed to a new exercise or mission until an AAR has been conducted for the previous exercise or mission.

How Should the AAR Be Compiled and Presented?

The **training objectives** should provide the structure for **performance data collection** during the exercise. Conclusions on the unit's strengths and weaknesses can then be formulated from the data. The **AAR presentation** is often **structured by Battlefield Operating Systems (BOSs)**, and since the BOSs are well understood and provide a good common starting place this can work well. However, there is nothing magical about this organization, and any organizing principle (such as the plan, prepare, execute phases of a mission) can be used which helps to uncover strengths and weaknesses in critical processes. The AAR facilitator should develop a strategy for facilitating the discussion during the AAR to uncover the key learning points.

The time and place of the AAR should be announced, if the situation requires this, and the necessary participants should be encouraged to attend. The AAR facilitator should provide the initial focus for the AAR by reviewing the unit's training objectives, mission, OPFOR plan, etc. as outlined above. Then the task becomes one of guiding the training audience in a discussion to uncover the teaching points he has previously determined as the agenda for the AAR. The facilitator must be skilled at asking leading questions to allow the training audience to discover their strengths and weaknesses on their own to the extent possible. The facilitator should also lead a discussion of fixes for weaknesses. The intent should always be to maintain an atmosphere that is non-threatening so that the training audience feels comfortable in discussing their mistakes.

Should the AAR Use Preformatted Templates or Products?

There is no single "yes" or "no" answer to this question. Since training objectives should drive the performance data collection and AAR content, it will likely be possible to develop base templates and products which will be common to many unit's at any given echelon. The AAR should not be confined to preformatted templates or products as that would restrict flexibility needlessly; however, in areas where experience shows that units at a given echelon routinely experience difficulty, preformatted templates or products can save a great deal of time in preparing for the AAR. The key questions here are: What points should be made during the AAR and what sort of presentation will work best? When graphic templates or products are used, they should be designed to facilitate fast and accurate perception and understanding by the training audience. Lewis and Fallesen (1989) have developed guidelines for matching the presentation format to the type of data to be displayed, and would be a helpful guide for persons responsible for presenting information in graphic form for AARs.

In a computer-driven training environment, technology makes it possible to capture a great deal of data. The unfortunate tendency this capability generates is a desire to present all the data available to the training audience. This should be avoided since data overload can so overwhelm the training audience that they are unable to assimilate what they **need** to know. One simple principle should drive the selection of data elements for presentation - know what you intend to do with the data (what teaching point) and present the data which provides support or illustrates that issue.

Should the AAR Contain Event Type or Process Type Presentations?

The AAR must contain **both** event and process presentations. It is the event which provides the context within which the processes (tasks) take place. Since the purpose of the AAR is to provide feedback on performance, the focus will necessarily be on process or individual task performance data. However, the training audience is not acting in a vacuum. There are situational factors (events) which impact on their performance and they will certainly be aware of those factors which may have impacted upon their tasks or processes being trained. These situational factors often lead the training audience to arrive at different explanations for their behavior and lead to different conclusions about performance than the perceptions of the trainer (O/C or AAR facilitator). For these reasons, event type data should be used to provide context for task performance and to provide the relevant "why" component of feedback when necessary. However, the training audience should be encouraged to go beyond the simple event - outcome discussions, focusing instead on task performance and outcomes.

Should the AAR Be Multi-Echelon or Single Echelon?

The AAR should contain representatives from as many echelons as necessary in order to have **all relevant players** participate. Units seldom act in a vacuum. Performance of training tasks frequently has connections with at least one echelon up and one echelon down, as well as adjacent units, whether the other units are also training or acting as role players to support the CFX. While it is necessary to keep the number of attendees at any AAR to a manageable level, this should not be done at the expense of vital input from all echelons involved.

Should the AAR Focus on Single or Multiple Battlefield Operating Systems (BOSs)?

The number of BOSs included in the AAR will depend on the training objectives and the structure of the training event. If the training exercise is designed to provide training for a single BOS in isolation, then no other BOS needs to be included in the feedback. However, most training events will have the intent of training several or all BOS simultaneously and the AAR should provide feedback on all of them.

In summary, each trainee should attend at least one AAR during each training event and, at the conclusion of the AAR, should have a thorough understanding of his performance strengths and weaknesses as defined by the training objectives. He should also have information on how performance in weak areas can be improved next time. The training objectives should drive the performance data collection and the AAR content. Methods for presenting information during the AAR should be selected based upon the material and the learning points to be made. Consideration should be given to human factors guidelines for display of information graphically. Trainees (or role players) from all echelons and BOSs which are important to understanding what happened during the training event, or why it happened, should attend the AAR .

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