

CONDUCTING AFTER-ACTION REVIEWS AND RETROSPECTS IN THE OPERATIONS EVALUATION DEPARTMENT

Rationale. In the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the core task of the Operations Evaluation Department (OED) is the systematic and objective assessment of policies, strategies, country programs, and projects, including their design, implementation, results, and associated business processes. OED examines relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, and sustainability to enhance understanding of what works, what does not, what should be improved, and (where revealed by evaluation findings) how. The experience that ADB has gained is its most important organizational asset. The same applies to OED which, to help ADB become a learning organization that continuously improves its development effectiveness and is accountable to its stakeholders, must not only evaluate but also improve and facilitate learning, including in-house vis-à-vis the conduct of its work. [Exit interviews](#) are a way to capture knowledge from leavers.¹ [Peer assists](#) are about teams asking for help for the benefit of their members.² They are about "learning before doing". But continuously assessing organizational performance to meet or exceed expectations requires also that one obtain feedback and understand what happened (or did not happen) during an activity or project, or soon after completion.³ After-action reviews are about "learning while doing:" they identify how to correct shortcomings and sustain accomplishments. Retrospects are about "learning after doing:" they capture the new knowledge acquired after the fact.⁴ In both instances, knowledge gleaned from and compiled by those closest to the review can be used to improve results and can be shared with others who are planning, developing, implementing, and evaluating similar efforts.

Definition. After-action reviews are a leadership and knowledge sharing tool which brings together the team that is closest to the activity or project, when a critical milestone has been reached, to discuss successes and failures in an open and honest fashion. The purpose is to learn from the experience to take the lessons learned into the next phase of the activity or project, or to accomplish related tasks more effectively the next time a similar activity or project is conducted. After-action reviews and retrospects are linked conceptually. The difference lies in the degree of detail and the formality applied to the process of conducting them.

Benefits. When administered in a climate of openness, candid discussion, clarity, and commitment to identifying and recommending solutions, after-action reviews and retrospects yield many benefits. The participants in the review, e.g., managers, leaders, and those planning to pursue a similar activity or project in the future, will understand more clearly what was originally intended, what transpired and why, as well as what might be done better and how. The number of subsequent repeats of mistakes or missteps will decrease. Furthermore, reports from after-action reviews and retrospects that make concrete and actionable recommendations will increase the chances of success of similar activities or projects. Lastly, the promotion of open and frequent communication and sharing and the institutionalization of regularly held meetings that examine strengths to sustain and shortcomings to remedy will also improve morale.

¹ ADB. 2007. [Guidelines for Conducting Exit Interviews in the Operations Evaluation Department](http://www.adb.org/documents/guidelines/conducting-exit-interviews/exit-interviews-oed.pdf). Manila. Available: www.adb.org/documents/guidelines/conducting-exit-interviews/exit-interviews-oed.pdf.

² ADB. 2007. [Conducting Peer Assists in the Operations Evaluation Department](http://www.adb.org/documents/guidelines/conducting-peer-assists/guidelines.pdf). Manila. Available: www.adb.org/documents/guidelines/conducting-peer-assists/guidelines.pdf.

³ In OED, activities typically relate to (i) conducting and disseminating strategic evaluations (in consultation with stakeholders), (ii) harmonizing performance indicators and evaluation methodologies, and (iii) developing capacity in evaluation and evaluative thinking.

⁴ After-action reviews and retrospects are not audits. The latter are often evaluative or conducted for purposes of accountability. The former aim to turn knowledge into action, not to make judgments.

Process. The focus of an after-action review is to answer three broad questions: What did we set out to do? What worked well, and why? What might we do differently next time, and how? However, there are many ways to tackle these questions: the desired simplicity at the heart of after-action reviews and retrospects means that there is potential to experiment and find ways that will work best with the activity or project examined and the team involved in these. Be it for after-action reviews or retrospects, the processes should be kept simple and easy to remember. Box 1 elaborates on the purpose of the principal questions to ask. Box 2 itemizes the process of planning, preparing, conducting, and following up on an after-action review.

Box 1: After-Action Review Questions

Question	Purpose
What was supposed to happen? What actually happened? Why were there differences?	These questions establish a common understanding of the work item under review. The facilitator should encourage and promote discussion around these questions. In particular, divergences from the plan should be explored.
What worked? What didn't? Why?	These questions generate reflection about the successes and failures during the course of the project, activity, event or task. The question 'Why?' generates understanding of the root causes of these successes and failures.
What would you do differently next time?	This question is intended to help identify specific actionable recommendations. The facilitator asks the team members for crisp and clear, achievable and future-oriented recommendations.

Source: 2008. Overseas Development Institute. *After-Action Reviews and Retrospects*. Available: www.odi.org.uk/rapid/tools/toolkits/km/aar.html

The Overseas Development Institute explains that the questions posed for a retrospect follow the after-action review format but involve asking the following more detailed questions:

- What did you set out to achieve?
- What was your plan to achieve this?
- How did this change as you progressed?
- What went well and why?
- What could have gone better?
- What advice would you give yourself if you were to go back to where you were at the start of the activity or project?
- What were the two or three key lessons you would share with others?
- What next for you in terms of this project?
- Can you think of a story that summarizes your experience of work on this activity or project?
- What should we have learned from this activity or project a year from now?
- Are there any lessons for you personally?

Box 2: The After-Action Review Process

Planning the After-Action Review
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify an event or activity to be reviewed. • Identify the primary point of contact for the review. • Determine when the after-action review will occur. • Decide who will attend the after-action review.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Select when and where the after-action review will take place. Plan for no more than 90 minutes.⁵ • Confirm who will support the after-action review, e.g., technical lead, champion, point of contact, minute taker.
Preparing for the After-Action Review
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Select a facilitator. • Confirm the venue and agenda. • Obtain inputs from interested parties. • Announce the after-action review and compile the list of attendees. • Make logistical arrangements and set up the venue.
Conducting the After-Action Review
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seek maximum participation. • Maintain focus on a positive and informative after-action review. • Ensure honest, candid, and professional dialogue. • Record key points.
Following Up: Using the Results of the After-Action Review
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Determine actionable recommendations that will improve the process. • Identify tasks requiring senior leadership decisions. • Determine a follow up schedule and point of contact for each follow-up action. • Provide assistance and support as required.

Source: 2006. U.S. Agency for International Development. *After-Action Review: Technical Guidance*. Washington. Available: <http://knowledge.usaid.gov/aar.htm>

Note: This publication details the four steps in the after-action review process. It provides checklists for the planning and conduct of after-action reviews and for their logistical arrangements and setup. It also offers ground rules for facilitators.

Others. After-action reviews and retrospects are not critique or complaint sessions. They are intended to maximize experience by allowing everyone to learn from each other. They are not a full-scale evaluation. And, they are not a cure for all problems. After-action reviews are successful when leaders support them, they are done immediately—by the team and for the team, and participants agree to be honest.

⁵ An after-action review might last as little as 20 minutes.