



After Action Reviews

By Deputy Chief Frank Viscuso

One way of attaining information is with an After Action Review (AAR). An AAR is a structured review or debriefing method for analyzing what happened, why it happened, and how things can be done better. The formal AAR was originally developed by the U.S. Army. The concept works and has been adapted by many non-military organizations, both domestic and international. The fire service has also come to know the AAR by another term – the Post Incident Analysis (PIA). Both AAR's and PIA's can be conducted after every single incident simply by asking these 4 questions.

1. What was our overall mission?
2. What did we do well?
3. What could we have done better or differently?
4. Who do we need to inform?

One of the best ways for you to prepare your team is by gathering after every unique challenge, no matter how small, and conducting an AAR. This tool can be used to gather information and build accountability within your organization. This type of review can also be used to help a leader establish his or her intent and explain the end result they want to accomplish.

- Formal ARR/PIA's are conducted with every member on the team. They are intended to provide the maximum educational and training benefit.

- Informal AAR's are usually conducted with fewer members and prior to the formal one. The main goal is to discuss what worked and take immediate corrective actions in case another incident occurs before a formal review.

Regardless of what you call it, and whether it is formal or informal. The main purpose is to discuss what went right and what went wrong. Identify and take note of what actions were correct, discuss what needs to be improved upon, find the best way to perform a specific task or mitigate a specific type of incident, and prepare the team so the next time you respond to the same type of call you are better.

If you are not discussing ways to improve, you are not leading a team. In fact, if you are not focused on finding ways to prepare and improve, you are failing in the role as a team leader. Continuous improvement is what every high performance organization strives for.

Too many people are afraid to critique performances because they are afraid to raise some form of legal liability. They are afraid that they may have done something wrong, which contributed to a poor outcome. Let's get away from this mindset and start realizing that we have to analyze our performance, otherwise we cannot get better.

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