

It's not what you do...it's what you do after you've done it.

By Michael Bungay Stanier

Most of us don't bother with a post-event analysis. But even when we do, they can be painfully horrible affairs: a combination of passive-aggressive politeness with no one willing to mention the "dead moose" (or "dead elephant" or "dead kangaroo", depending on your country of origin) that is in the room. (For those unfamiliar with the phrase, we're talking about the thing that's big and rotten and getting in the way of everything).

Two principles & five questions

An After Action Review (AAR) is focused primarily on learning and building community. It is founded on two related principles:

This is not to judge success or failure (and hence apportion blame) but rather the focus is on what can be learned for moving forward.

There's a belief (what Norman L. Kerth calls the Prime Directive) that regardless of what's discovered, the participants understand and truly believe that everyone did the best job they could, given what they knew at the time, their skills and abilities, the resources available, and the situation at hand.

With that in place, there are five simple and profound questions to ask.

1. what did you intend?

This can be a simple restatement of your objectives.

What were you trying to achieve?

2. what happened?

This is useful for just getting a sense of what really happened. You can rest assured that your perspective of events is only one of the versions. The objective here is to collect both "the facts" (such as costs, number of people involved, figures, etc) and differing opinions on what worked and didn't work, what circumstances influenced what happened, and other factors.

When commenting on others' roles, capture specific behavioural events (what they did, what they said) rather than your conclusion about what they did (X did a poor job because...).

3. what can we learn about it?

There will be different levels of learning here, from the very specific ("don't wear Brand X socks - they give you blisters") to the more abstract ("this project wasn't close enough to my life purpose for me to be motivated").

Don't forget to ask here, "What did we do well that we need to discuss or else it will

be forgotten?” It’s very easy to jump to “the mistakes.” It’s most powerful to start with what’s been working.

Capture also “what still puzzles us?” You won’t be able to figure everything out. Be explicit about what it is that still is a mystery.

4. what should we do differently next time?

This is powerful because it plants seeds for the “next time” conversation. Without these seeds, we default back to a collective memory of “this is how we do things around here” which most often does not capitalize on the collected wisdom.

5. what should we do now?

There may well be actions to take right now: things to do, people to connect with. As with all actions, set up accountability: what will be done, by whom and by when.

From Idea to Action: Something to Practice

Look back on a recently completed project or event. It might be a family holiday. It might be a project at work. It might be a date with your girlfriend or boyfriend.

Thinking about what happened, write down your answers to these five questions:

1. What did you intend?
2. What actually happened?
3. What did you learn?
4. What will you do differently in the future?
5. What should you do now?

If you’re feeling bolder, invite the others involved in the process and have the conversation with them as well.

Michael Bungay Stanier is the Senior Partner of Box of Crayons, a company that helps organizations do less Good Work and more Great Work. Download your free copy of “5 Strategies for Great Work” at www.BoxOfCrayons.biz