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Conducting After-Action Reviews and Retrospects

In a Word Organizational learning calls for nonstop assessment of performance—its successes and failures. This makes sure that learning takes place and supports continuous improvement. After-action reviews and retrospects are a tool that facilitates assessments; they enable this by bringing together a team to discuss an activity or project openly and honestly.



Rationale

Exit interviews are a way to capture knowledge from leavers. Peer assists are about teams asking for help for the benefit of their members. 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. 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.¹ In both

¹After-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 make judgments.

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 bring 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 and 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. Finally, 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.

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 process should be kept simple and easy to remember. To note, 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's 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?

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.

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