

6.0 Practice Guide – Capability Area #3: Experiential Learning

Informal Action Review

Tips for developing an approach for informal action reviews

What is an informal action review?

The BP model of experiential learning (see case study in section 3 of the guide) includes learning practices before, during and after each phase of an initiative. The informal action review is a low investment/high benefit tool considered most useful **during** each phase.

Why use an informal action review?

In governments, there are often no formalized knowledge-generating and -sharing processes within and across programs and projects. This is a simple, structured approach that can be applied to increase learning.

What to do:

- Establish a house rule of *no rank*. During the action review, all are trusted equals.
- At each logical pause (e.g., after a half-day meeting or the first days of a pilot) have a good facilitator lead a candid 3-5 minute conversation focused on:
 - What did we set out to do?
 - What actually happened?
 - What have we learned from that?
- Don't assume that deviations from a plan are bad.
- Focus on learning, not judging.

As a default, do not record anything. Only document if the group thinks that is important to capture a point for lessons learned.

Rationale:

- This technique was developed and refined in the military (US Army). The developers found that this quick, easy, immediate, *regular* practice enhanced learning, saved lives and complemented other more formal knowledge tools.
- The developers emphasize the importance of no rank and no documentation.
- Because the developers used the technique in combat, the term “after action” review was coined, but the technique is an effective tool while work is ongoing.
- Some organizations document, but the original undocumented approach may be most beneficial, in part because it emphasizes the open, frank, egalitarian intent of the tool.

When?

As a regular part of core business activities
Could begin to establish practice as a habit now

Benefits:

Enhances individual and collective learning and continuous improvement, providing detail often not found in lessons learned

Pitfalls to avoid:

Trying to turn the review into a more sophisticated process
Not getting or staying in the habit of doing the reviews

To learn more:

Collison, C., & Parcell, G. (2001; 2004). *Learning to Fly: Practical Knowledge Management from Leading and Learning Organizations*. Chichester: Capstone Publishing (Wiley).

Garvin, D. (2000). *The U.S. Army's After Action Reviews: Seizing the Chance to Learn*. Retrieved October 23, 2009, from Wildfire lessons: http://www.wildfirelessons.net/documents/Garvin_AAR_Excerpt.pdf