

## From Training Individuals to Building an Organization that Learns: The Case for After Action Reviews in Intelligence

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*“Excellence is not an act but a habit. We are what we repeatedly do.”*

—Aristotle (as paraphrased by Will Durant)

*“A man who tries to carry a cat home by its tail will learn a lesson that can be learned in no other way.”*

—Mark Twain

Today the United States faces an array of disruptive threats that challenge the Intelligence Community’s ability to protect our nation. Many of these threats are novel and intertwined, and the only way to navigate them is to learn our way through. But for numerous organizations, concepts of learning are heavily weighted toward teaching established skills—things people already know how to do. The new insights the Community will need to solve the problems we are grappling with in the moment will not come from the classroom; they will be wrung from day-to-day operations. To facilitate this, we need to learn more at the edge. We need to learn in the mud. The following is my thinking about how it can be done in CIA.

Fortunately, the US Army has pioneered some methods that can help illuminate the way forward. We already adopted one important Army organizational learning practice in the form of CIA’s Lessons Learned (LL) program—established in 2007—which falls under the agency’s Center for the Study of Intelligence (CSI). This small but capable outfit, inspired by the Army’s Center for Army

Lessons Learned (CALL), seeks to extract key lessons from contemporary activities for the benefit of the broader enterprise via periodic deep dive research projects and expert analysis. What is missing, however, is the complementary, grassroots component of the Army’s LL process, the After Action Review (AAR). The Army’s handbook on establishing LL programs flatly states: “You cannot have an effective LL program without the AAR.”<sup>a</sup> We should heed this advice and add the AAR to our organizational learning toolbox.

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### ***The Concept of Organizational Learning***

There is a consensus among authoritative thinkers on strategy and management about the importance of organizational learning in fostering sustained success in environments of disruptive change.<sup>b</sup> Institutionally, however, the CIA has tended to associate learning with training, whereby those who possess knowledge pass it down to those who seek it in a pedagogical, teacher-student dynamic, whether in classroom settings or, more recently, using online instructional tools that push content to the

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a. Center for Army Lessons Learned (CALL), *Establishing a Lessons Learned Program: Observations, Insights, and Lessons* (CALL,2011), 63.

b. W. Edwards Deming’s PDCA Cycle (plan, do, check, adjust) and Peter Senge’s conception of a Learning Organization are two of the better known examples, but there are many others.

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workplace. Such methods are useful in passing down core skills on subjects for which we believe best practices are already known, but our most urgent challenges deal with dynamic new issues that we are endeavoring to solve as we face them.

Traditional training techniques are ill-suited to near-real-time knowledge capture, analysis, and adaptation, i.e., learning as we do. We should therefore broaden our concept of learning to more fully embrace methods in which learners themselves harvest key lessons from the daily conduct of their front line operations and transfer these insights upward for the benefit of others. This is a key element of how an organization educates itself and adapts to change, for as Darwin forewarned, it is not the strongest or most intelligent that survive, but the most adaptable.

Many private sector management thinkers have championed the cause of organizational learning and chronicled efforts related to this practice by the likes of British Petroleum, Shell Oil, General Electric, and LL Bean, yet it is interesting how so many tip their hats to the US Army's AAR practice as having blazed the trail.<sup>a</sup> This is a rare instance in which a government bureaucracy has innovated an organizational practice that was subsequently embraced by the private sector. It usually works in the other direction. For this reason, and because, like the Army, the CIA

operates in the national security realm, the AAR tool is a logical place to start if we wish to bolster our capacity as a learning, adaptive enterprise. It is a proven and battle tested practice that would be relatively simple to overlay onto our existing structures and integrate with our current LL process and learning enterprise activities. Yet for all its simplicity, establishing an AAR culture offers transformational promise.

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#### ***AARs and the US Military***

The US Army devised and implemented the AAR process after the Vietnam War, when the service was at its post WW2 nadir—defeated, scorned, demoralized, and rife with drug abuse and racial animosity. Army leadership faced up to this challenge by rededicating itself to a process of systematic professionalization in the art of warfighting at all levels. Three key elements of this commitment were; 1) the creation of the National Training Center (NTC) at Ft. Irwin, at which Army combined arms forces were put through lengthy and realistic exercises against dedicated opposing force (OPFOR) units in battle-like simulations; 2) introduction of the AAR as the principal vehicle for practitioners to identify and *push upward* the knowledge gleaned from these experiences; 3) the establishment of the Center for Army Lessons Learned (CALL) at Ft. Leavenworth to conduct deep dive research projects on particular issues

or operations to *pull inward* insights generated at the edge, and to track and analyze the range of observations, including those derived from AARs, for lessons meriting inclusion in an ever-evolving Army doctrine.

Of the three, the AAR was the most revolutionary and central to the evolution of a service-wide culture of learning. The Army leadership's key insight was recognizing that much wisdom about warfighting could be won if it could condition soldiers in lower echelons, who constituted the leading edge of the service, to reflect systematically on the reasons for their failures or successes, and then push their observations upward for consideration by the broader organization.

This was a practice that did not come naturally to an institution more commonly associated with a top-down command & control ethos. As one retired major general put it, "For the US Army, it was a significant culture shock. The preeminence of rank, age, and established doctrinal methods were the foundation of the organization. Now, AARs made the generals and colonels sit and listen while the lieutenants and sergeants commented on how and why battles were won and lost."<sup>b</sup>

The US Army's AAR handbook describes the AAR as, "a guided analysis of an organization's performance, conducted at appropriate times during and at the conclusion of a training event or operation, with the objective of improving future performance. It includes a facilitator, event participants, and other

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a. See, for example: David Garvin David, *Learning in Action: A Guide to Putting the Learning Organization to Work* (Harvard Business Review Press; 2015); Marilyn Darling et.al., "Learning in the Thick of It," *Harvard Business Review*, August 2014.

b. Robert Ivany, "The US Army's Secret to Building a Leader-Driven, Learning Culture: After Action Reviews." Chiefexecutive.net, October 19, 2018.

observers.”<sup>a</sup> The AAR process can be formal or informal and can last for minutes or hours. The discussion always revolves around the same four questions:

- What did we set out to do?
- What actually happened?
- What was right or wrong about what happened, and why?
- What would we do differently next time?

A facilitator generally guides AAR discussions to make sure the participants stay on track. AARs require candor and a temporary suspension of traditional norms of authority to foster an honest interchange between superiors and subordinates, and a recognition that disagreement does not constitute disrespect or insubordination. Thirty-plus years of experience with the process have identified the essential elements needed to make AARs successful:

- They must be structured and stick to the four questions outlined above.
- Conduct them soon enough after the event being reviewed so that memories are still fresh, but not so soon that there has not been time for some initial reflection.
- Include as many participants in the event as practical, and from multiple ranks and disciplines.

- The AAR should be guided by a skilled facilitator (referred to by the Army as the Observer/Controller—O/C) who can be more detached. AARs should pointedly not be conducted by the leader of the activity being reviewed.
- The AAR must be a vehicle for learning, not accountability, working under the presumption that everyone makes mistakes. The atmosphere should encourage participants to discuss their own shortcomings and call it like they see it, but without rancor. It is about the mission, not egos.
- The results should be written up promptly and forwarded to the component charged with reviewing the takeaways for possible flagging to the broader organization.

The migration of the Army’s AAR process from training exercises to operational deployments and combat situations did not gain traction until Operation Desert Storm and the post 9/11 conflicts. Although official Army literature on AARs, including its current handbook, remains heavily weighted toward the tool’s application to training exercises, it is a tribute to the cultural transformation that AARs helped to establish that Army personnel now reflexively reach for it to navigate a wide range of real-world challenges outside of training.

### *AARs in Business*

It did not take long for business thinkers to recognize the implications of this innovation for commercial enterprises. Peter Senge, a leading business theorist and author of *The Fifth Discipline*, described the AAR as “arguably one of the most successful organizational learning methods yet devised,”<sup>b</sup> and he urged businesses to adopt the practice to foster reflection, broaden awareness, and sustain learning over time.

Columbia University School of Business Professor Willie Pietersen lauded the AAR in the context of generating “strategic learning,” which he characterized as an “insight-to-action-to-insight cycle” that was about “learning your way to excellence.”<sup>c</sup> Harvard’s David Garvin wrote, “AARs are a powerful, appealing tool. The concept is easy to grasp and inexpensive to apply, amounting to little more than organized reflection.”<sup>d</sup>

Many experienced US Army officers entering the business world around this time also brought the AAR with them as a best practice adaptable to the private sector. For example, Todd Henshaw, formerly the Director of Military Leadership at West Point, refined the AAR concept for executive leadership programs at the University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton School,<sup>e</sup> and former Army Chief of Staff Gordon Sullivan devoted an entire chapter to AARs and CALL in his book on the application

a. *A Leader’s Guide to After Action Reviews*. Headquarters, Dept. of the Army, 2013.

b. Peter Senge, Introduction to M.Darling & C.Parry’s *From Post-Mortem to Living Practice: An In-Depth Study of the Evolution of the After Action Review* (Signet, 2001), 4–5.

c. Willie Pietersen, *Strategic Learning: How to be Smarter than Your Competition and Turn Key Insights into Competitive Advantage* (Wiley, 2010). 172.

d. Garvin, *Learning in Action*, 111.

e. Todd Henshaw, “After Action Reviews,” *Wharton Executive Education*, February 15, 2019.

of Army leadership principles to business.<sup>a</sup>

One difference in how AARs are employed by business relative to the military is the greater emphasis placed by business in the tool's value in creating altogether new insights from ongoing operations, often referred to as "generative learning," rather than teasing out incremental improvements, referred to as "adaptive learning," from training exercises. Marilyn Darling and Charles Parry coined the term "emergent learning" to characterize the concept, and they described the AAR as an excellent vehicle for putting this into practice due to its demonstrated ability for "weaving a disciplined process for learning through experience into the tapestry of ongoing work . . . and [thereby] 'learning our way through' difficult and complex situations."<sup>b</sup>

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### *AARs and Intelligence*

Today the CIA and other intelligence agencies face a host of wicked challenges that we must learn how to deal with quickly and effectively if we are to prevail against increasingly capable adversaries. Our conception of learning, however, mostly centers around developing efficient ways for the enterprise to deliver learning content associated with established professional skills to agency personnel to help make them better at their jobs. While this is an essential function, to generate the new knowledge and insights we will need overcome our current challenges, we must more effectively meld our learning with our doing in a way that creates a

truly bi-directional learning process in which knowledge is passed not only downward from the enterprise to practitioners, but upward from practitioners back to the enterprise based on what they are experiencing at the front lines.

The CIA's establishment of a formal Lessons Learned process to capture knowledge gleaned from current operations demonstrates that CIA leadership recognizes this imperative. Current LL efforts, however, represent only part of the organizational learning equation, one that cannot realistically hope to affect the agency's learning culture at scale. Today's LL projects marshal knowledgeable, but external, teams of observers who deploy for a limited number of events to pull salient observations from participants, usually via an oral interview process. The teams then take this information back for analysis that, in time, results in scholarly and high quality assessments containing insights with relevance to other operations.

While clearly valuable, what is missing are the more ubiquitous and timelier streams of observations pushed upward by operators themselves that a cadre-driven AAR process could provide. AAR reports would be shorter and less polished than those resulting from LL research projects, to be sure, but since the practitioners would be conducting the analysis themselves rather than delegating this to external actors, working levels would steadily cultivate habits of professional reflection and complex analysis in multidisciplinary team environments. This in

turn would hold better prospects for advancing our learning culture and collaborative instincts.

Local CIA managers may occasionally conduct AAR-like debriefings or "hot washes" after real-world operations, but these are done irregularly at best and are generally locally initiated and locally consumed. The lessons gleaned from such *ad hoc* reviews also tend to dissipate quickly as a consequence of our practice of regular personnel rotation and our underdeveloped mechanisms for reflection and knowledge sharing.

Both military and business users stress the value of AARs as an iterative process for generating continuous learning loops rather than being thought of as singular events. Those who employ the tool only infrequently will be disappointed. AARs must become routine practice if we are to leverage their true power. Relatedly, we should view AARs as more than just a tool to be used when something goes wrong, but as a behavior that is tied to the process wanting to get better—of wanting to win. We should use them in both successful and unsuccessful operations, as both present opportunities to learn.

Mating a grassroots AAR process to our existing Lessons Learned and Learning Enterprise functions would not require a fundamental, Agency-wide reorganization nor an extensive shift of resources or personnel. Its logic is self-evident, so we should not need to retain outside expertise at great expense to help us figure it out. The military and private sector have learned much about the tool's

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a. Gordon R. Sullivan and Michael V. Harper, *Hope is not a Method: What Business Leaders can Learn from America's Army* (Broadway Books, 1997), 189–211.

b. Charles Parry and Marilyn Darling, "Emergent Learning in Action: The After Action Review," *The Systems Thinker*, February 6, 2018.

strengths and weaknesses over the past 30 years, so we can benefit from their experience and avoid the pitfalls they encountered as we tailor the process to our needs. Sometimes it pays to be a late adopter.

While the Army has provided an excellent model in the AAR, the tool would require thoughtful customization to take into account differences in the circumstances under which the CIA, and other intelligence agencies, and the US Army operate. For one, at any given time only a fraction of US Army personnel are engaged in combat operations, providing significant time while in garrison for training and reflection. CIA staffing levels, on the other hand, require its personnel to operate in a state of near continuous engagement, whether that be human or technical operations, analysis, or support activities.

Peacetime for soldiers is wartime for intelligence officers. An AAR methodology for CIA must be sensitive to the need to avoid prolonged absences from day-to-day mission responsibilities. Another CIA peculiarity is the more stringent requirement for secrecy and compartmentation relative to Army operations. Greater discretion would be required in reporting particularly sensitive information in CIA AARs, but the agency has mechanisms for compartmentalizing and handling classified information, and indoctrinates its personnel from the outset to deal with such decisions.

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***Conclusion***

Committing to an AAR culture would not be especially complicated, but it would take determination and perseverance to ensure the behavior was institutionalized. One option would be to oblige any activity or operation that entailed the expenditure of a set dollar amount or employment of a certain level of personnel resources to conduct an AAR upon its conclusion to mine learning points for the benefit of the enterprise, whether the operation was successful or not.

We might also try positive incentives to encourage the practice, such as by rewarding teams that produce AARs whose insights were subsequently viewed and employed by others, much as we do by tracking the readership and usage of other products. In this spirit, it should be possible to expand our organizational metrics to track not only outputs and outcomes as measures of success, but also inputs and investments that are proven to lead to future success, such as learning and collaboration, behaviors strengthened by practices like the AAR.

A respected management thinker defined a learning organization as one “skilled at creating, acquiring, and transferring knowledge, and at modifying its behavior to reflect new knowledge and insights.”<sup>a</sup> To better live up to this standard and foster a spirit of organizational autodidacticism, we need not just instructors,

curricula, and courses, but facilitators and processes woven into the fabric of our ongoing operations to capture and metabolize new lessons that we generate as we go about our business. We can then leverage these insights into the innovations and initiatives we need to overcome the complex challenges we face.

Given the hectic pace of our work caused by the urgency of these challenges, this practice can also serve as a vehicle through which the agency’s leadership can signal not only its acceptance, but its expectation that frontline operators take brief but regular pauses from their pressing business to candidly analyze and discuss, as teams, what and how they are doing, and adjust and innovate accordingly. The AAR concept is ready-made for this. It is deceptively simple yet, if employed systematically across disciplines and hierarchies, offers in a single tool the prospect of honing multiple key behaviors beyond learning that our workforce needs to be successful: collaboration, shared purpose, systems thinking, initiative, and innovation.

The AAR is widely acknowledged as having played a key role in transforming the US Army from a rigid, doctrinaire force into an adaptive, learning organization. There is no reason to think it could not offer similarly profound benefits to CIA or other IC components. We need only resolve ourselves to borrow it.



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a. Garvin, “Building a Learning Organization.”

