

Building a Culture of Leadership, Accountability and Mental Health

Through After Action Reviews

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Abstract

This paper will assess publications detailing some of the challenges faced by police agencies and the benefits the after action review (AAR) provides in meeting those challenges when implemented into modern day policing. There is a necessity for leadership at all levels of an organization, accountability to the community and the treatment of psychological trauma caused by the events that first responders are frequently exposed to. The culmination of information in the publications researched places great value on the AAR when regularly and properly conducted; supporting that AARs promote and develop a culture of organizational leadership and accountability while establishing a base line for the identification of mental health trauma, primarily Post-Traumatic Stress (PTS) and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). There are conflicting opinions within some of the research material that suggests talking about trauma can impair the natural healing of the brain. The difference in opinion appears to be based on limited research studies that evaluated psychological trauma from Critical Stress Incidents (CSI) where a Critical Stress Incident Debriefing (CISD), not an AAR should be conducted. In these types of incidents, peer support and Crisis Intervention (CI) through a Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) system would be needed. The last two pages of this paper were provided by Lt. Steve Chamness of the North Little Rock Police Department and contain a guideline and a visual template for conducting an AAR.

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Through After Action Reviews

Although the constitutional foundation of law enforcement organizations remains steadfast, the ways in which we must police our communities is constantly evolving. According to Edward Flynn and Victoria Herrington (2015), “Police must contend with new threats, new technologies, new crimes and new communities, all of which create new challenges and opportunities for policing” (p.1). In response, police agencies must continually update policy directives, develop new training programs and then ensure that officers at all ranks are well educated and effectively trained. These tasks must be executed in a hazardous work environment compounded with personnel complications, budget constraints, and long standing organizational practices; all under the authority granted by public trust and the scrutiny of hindsight.

Research shows that police agencies that utilize After Action Reviews (AAR) within their daily operations will be better equipped in meeting the aforementioned challenges. Through proper implementation of AARs a police agency will benefit in several ways. Most importantly, AARs effectively build a culture of leadership at every level throughout the organization. Secondly, AARs allow the police agency to train and learn in a manner that allows them to remain responsive and accountable not only to themselves, but also to the communities they serve. Last but not least, AARs establish a base line for the early identification and a pathway towards the treatment of mental health trauma suffered by police officers.

Prior to going into detail about the ways in which conducting AARs benefit police agencies, it is important to provide a brief historical context on why they were developed and how they are intended to function. The United States Army created the AAR in the 1980s in an

effort to reestablish their military forces after the Vietnam War (Ivany, 2018). AARs were designed to be more than a debrief cataloging mistakes made, but an opportunity to learn and improve in order for soldiers to respond more effectively. AARs are a meeting of all personnel involved in an incident where a discussion is conducted, focusing on individual and group successes and failures in order to determine which practices should be improved and those that should be sustained. According to *A Leader's Guide to After Action Reviews* published by the Department of the Army (1993):

To fight and win, we must train our soldiers during peacetime to successfully execute their wartime missions. We must use every training opportunity to improve soldier, leader, and unit task performance. To improve their individual and collective-task performances to meet or exceed the Army standard, soldiers and leaders must know and understand what happened or did not happen during every training event (p.2).

Winning is the utilitarian goal of the Army's AAR and winning is exactly what they did. Marilyn Darling, Charles Parry and Joseph Moore (2005) explained that the U. S. Army's Opposing Force (OPFOR), an organization that trains soldiers for combat, uses AARs to prepare for monthly wargame exercises and that they always win. "Underlying OPFOR's consistent success is the way it uses the after-action review, a method for extracting lessons from one event or project and applying them to others." (Darling et al., 2005) The AAR needs to address four critical questions: "What were our intended results? What were our actual results? What caused our results? What will we sustain or improve?" (Darling et al., 2005) Once these lessons were "applied and validated" through future successes then they can be considered a learned good practice that should be sustained. AARs are an effective way to ensure that members of your police agency learn valuable lessons faster. AARs can be formal in nature which is most

common after large scale events, such as a scheduled raid or an officer involved shooting. Most AARs conducted will be classified as informal. These are AARs that are conducted on a day to day basis after events such as traffic stops, pursuits, uses of force and any other incident where mistakes could have been made. (Harris, 2018) Whether the AAR is conducted formally in a briefing room or informally in convenience store parking lot, the structured format is what ultimately provides the benefits previously mentioned. Although AARs are designed to be a forum where the participants should not fear personal criticism, “there should be zero tolerance for character, moral and legal issues” (Chamness, 2020).

Leadership

The primary benefit of utilizing AARs is that they promote and build a leadership culture within the organization which in turn fuels innovative problem solving. This is why companies such as Shell, Colgate-Palmolive, Harley-Davidson have adapted the AAR to suit their specific needs (Darling et al., 2005). Most people are familiar with the adage “lead by example,” and that is one of the requirements when conducting any AAR. “The first key component in creating this culture is to understand the difference between managing and leading” (Reynolds, 2014, p.2). How many times have you been in a meeting with a supervisor where you felt uncomfortable or afraid to express your opinions and ideas? The structured guidelines of an AAR permit every person involved in an incident the freedom to acknowledge their deficiencies as well as their successes. Betsy Brantner Smith (2020) acknowledges that “some teams will still be reluctant to allow conflict to occur, even when given permission” (p.1). In regards to police agencies this is exactly why discussion must begin with the highest ranking officer in the AAR admitting their own failures during the incident. The “team leader must both have the confidence and courage to call people out and force discussion and resolution, but they must do

so with respect and objectivity” (Brantner Smith, 2020, p.1). This addresses several key requirements to building a culture of leadership at every level within an organization.

Dan Murphy (2018) echoes this idea when he states that “admitting mistakes or shortcomings gains the trust of subordinates for real leaders” (p.3). Murphy further explains that “when they observe a senior officer admit a mistake or that he could have done something better they gain respect for their senior officer for being authentic- a common area for improvement among first responders” (2018, p.2). By sharing responsibility in the failures of an incident, subordinates are more likely to feel as if they can do the same. As more officers with alpha personalities become engaged in the AAR process, conflicts are sure to arise. Brantner Smith (2020) suggests that “using conflict can reduce the departmental politics that tend to plague our organizations and keep us from getting real work done” (p.1). Brantner Smith further states that “a great leader sets the stage for healthy conflict within his or her team” (p.1). Normal consequences of conflict can be mitigated through the defined structure of the AAR, allowing the benefits of the conflict to positively affect the group. The ranking leader must facilitate the discussions in order for the group to learn while preventing egos and finger pointing to spoil the process. By talking about how things went wrong and accepting responsibility, the rumor mill of negativity gets shut down before it has an opportunity to fester and grow. Initially, members will be reluctant to participate, however, as time goes on and AARs become more frequently used, the courage to speak up will become routine. “The two most significant factors of culture are the shared values and underlying assumptions that influence the attitudes and behaviors of those within the organization” (Reynolds, 2014, p.1). The AAR process allows officers of all ranks to share in the good and the bad of the incident. AARs provide the perfect opportunity for higher ranking officers to listen, observe and build those shared values. Brantner Smith mimics this

idea when she states that, “leadership is so much more than having the authority to order people around. True courageous leadership is having the ability to inspire trust in your people, encouraging and allowing them to discuss, debate and disagree with each other and with you” (2020, p.2).

Through spirited debate, AARs also provide insight for ranking leaders to identify the emerging leaders within their organization. Although leadership should be present at all levels in an agency, the truth remains that we all eventually move on. This reality makes it vital to the survival of any organization to have the next line of leaders ready to continue the mission. With the differing mindsets of the younger generation beginning to fill the ranks it is necessary to take the time to explain why. The need for the younger officer to understand must not be misconstrued as insubordination. Leadership development starts from day one and must continue each and every day of an officer’s career. For this reason, leaders need to “give priority to the process no matter what. Make time to learn from the crisis or situation” (Denn, 2017, p.1). We only do the organization and ourselves a disservice if we allow ourselves to be threatened by leadership development in subordinates. This is blatantly obvious when openings within specialized divisions become available and there is a limited pool of potential candidates with the ability to fill the roll (Saddington, 2015). “The evidence of a strong culture is an environment where police officers have the freedom to be creative and try different approaches to problem solving; they generate new ideas and feel engaged and invested in their jobs while making the community they serve to be a better, safer place” (Black, 2016, p.1).

Accountability

Making AARs a priority does more than develop individual and organizational leadership. “Leadership consciousness requires that members of the public-safety profession at all levels honestly examine their own thoughts and beliefs while never losing sight of the visibility and impact they have. Leadership is not about the title that one holds in a public-safety organization; it’s about the influence all members of the profession have on the people they serve” (Johnson, 2014, p.1). Police agencies are often the most scrutinized of all governmental bodies due to the salacious media coverage of isolated incidents involving police misconduct. The frequent political weaponization of isolated incidents involving police misconduct is being used to influence public perception of the police. This has created a new challenge that police agencies must overcome, even in communities where police agencies have had long standing support. One hundred and eighty one years ago, long before the time of television, Facebook status updates and Tweets, Sir Robert Peel stated, “the ability of the police to perform their duties is dependent upon public approval of police existence, actions, behavior, and the ability of the police to secure and maintain public respect” (Johnson,2014, p.1). By taking every opportunity to use AARs, police agencies can work towards remaining responsive and accountable to the communities they serve.

It goes without saying that the better educated and trained a police officer is, the more effectively they should be able to perform their duties in service to the community. The community expects police agencies to protect their lives, their rights, their property, and to remain above reproach while doing so. By taking every opportunity to train and learn, police officers can affirm the oaths the community has entrusted them to keep. “When agencies are faced with reduced staffing and reduced budgets, it is difficult to deny the inherent value of the informal AAR” (Murphy, 2018, p.3). The informal AAR is fiscally responsible because it costs

absolutely nothing but a little time. It does not require expensive tactical equipment or place pressures on already stretched overtime budgets. Most AARs can be conducted in the time between calls, at the end of shift, or over a lunch break.

A better trained officer creates better officer safety, which not only protects the officer but also the members of the community in which the officer has contact with. In an article published by Forbes Magazine, Jeff Boss (2016) explains six ways that AARs enhance a person's situational awareness. AARs help you think better, build shared contextual awareness, help sustain competitive advantage, spark creativity, enable decision making, and minimize interpretation (Boss 2016). Although these examples were taken from a business perspective, they can easily be applied to policing. When faced with danger, the worst decision a police officer can make is no decision at all. Officers must think quick, act quick and keep everyone safe at the same time. This becomes more challenging when the officer is confronted with unfamiliar situations. Many complaints made against police officers are often related to procedural tasks not understood by the complainant.

An example of a response to a complaint or perception of bias would be a police agencies requirement for an officer to identify themselves by rank, full name and to provide the reason they made the traffic stop immediately upon making contact with the driver of a vehicle. By taking the time to explain things to the driver an officer can eliminate misinterpretations the driver may have about why they were stopped. Policies such as these are designed to keep police agencies responsive and accountable to the public. AARs allow police officers to self-reflect and take responsibility for their interactions with the community in any situation. The lessons learned can then be applied to future situations, helping them be resolved safely while strengthening the relationship between police agencies and their communities. Poor communication is often

responsible for disconnect within any organization and typically leads to the loss of productivity and profitability. For police agencies, a break-down in communication leads to the loss of lives and the public trust.

Conducting AARs allows police agencies to identify their strengths and weaknesses in a timely and responsive manner. Police agencies also have the opportunity to conduct cost benefit analysis on particular tactics used to resolve events. During the AARs, there may be challenges identified that can't be resolved by the police agency without outside help. "The public's expectations have changed, and the public safety arena now includes more stakeholders with whom the police must work to tackle some of the endemic and complex issues facing communities" (Flynn, Herrington , 2015, p.1). There may be an issue that business or church leaders within a particular community may be better equipped at handling. There are problems that exist within communities that the police are expected to address that appear to be outside their purview. These problems should be addressed and with good reason. In reference to complicated and complex challenges, Flynn and Herrington (2015) write:

Although police may not be statutorily responsible for fixing those problems, there is incentive for them to do so when those problems lead to a rise in crime and a reduction in actual or perceived public safety, the metrics against which police performance is generally measured (p.1).

AARs allow police agencies opportunities to identify problems in the community as well as issues with their responses to those problems. If police agencies can strengthen and maintain the public trust, respect and cooperation then they will be better equipped in achieving their mission.

The public has the expectation that their police agencies can respond to any threat effectively. This has become even more challenging especially with the recent increases in mass shooting and active shooter situations. In cases like this, police agencies must be prepared before a major incident occurs. Thankfully, many police agencies have never had to respond to such events, however, that leaves them at a disadvantage for when the next one occurs. AARs conducted by other police agencies involved in mass shooting and active shooter situations and the lessons they learned are extremely valuable.

There is no need to make the mistake yourself if you can learn from the mistakes and successes of another. AARs and BARs (before action reviews) can provide the lessons and tactics that police agencies need in order to respond to serious and uncommon events in a way that the public demands. Police agencies must not wait for a major incident to conduct an AAR. By conducting frequent AARs on smaller incidents, police agencies can make sure they always have the basics down. BARs can provide a forum to develop a game plan for events that could potentially happen. Police agencies and their officers owe it to themselves and to the community to use every opportunity to prepare for what they may have to face. AARs identify training deficiencies that a police agency may need to address or a policy directive that needs to be updated. AARs also allow officers to adjust their tactics and approaches quickly for the next situation without waiting for formal training classes to be developed and implemented.

Most of us respond better to pressure placed on us by those we see as our peers. It's easier to dismiss criticism of your actions from an authoritarian supervisor than it is from a peer that has worked side by side with you for years. AARs require all those participating, not just the ranking leader, to have the courage to call each other out. Peer pressure before, during and after AARs can be used to positively influence and prepare officers for the future. The more

prepared the officers of an agency are, the more rapidly and effectively they will be able to respond in service to the community.

Mental Health

Most, if not all police officers choose this line of work because they see it as an opportunity to do some good in the community. There are internal (self) and external (public) expectations of police officers that require them to remain strong and determined when faced with the worst humanity has to offer. In fact, in order to do the job correctly these expectations are required. While facing the dangers in society it can be easy to forget that police officers are more than the oath they took. The difference is that most people get to live in a world without the constant bombardment of tragedy.

It is no secret that while responding to calls of service in the community, police officers and other first responders are frequently exposed to events that are traumatic. The frequent exposure to trauma, compounded with a constant heightened sense of danger and long exhausting work hours over the course of years on the job, will ultimately have some negative effects on a person's physical and mental health. Deteriorating physical health is often easy to see and remedy in many cases. The mental health trauma a police officer may suffer from, however, is much more difficult to identify.

In cases of an officer involved shooting, most police agencies, if not all, will utilize their Employee Assistance Program (EAP), requiring an officer to attend a minimum number of sessions with a psychologist prior to returning to active duty. These sessions are designed to assist an officer with processing the critical incident as well as determining whether an officer

can return to duty. According to retired NYPD Officer Dr. John Violanti (2018) at the University of Buffalo:

Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) may occur when a person is exposed to traumatic events. Persons so exposed may experience symptoms such as distressing memories of the event, and physiological emotional difficulties. Police officers are often exposed to traumatic events, such as seeing abused children or dead bodies, severe assaults, and involvement in shootings, and therefore at risk for PTSD. Such exposure can impair the mental well-being of officers and affect their ability to perform their duties to the public (p.1-2).

Additional long term effects of PTSD as explain by Violanti include but are not limited to “behavioral dysfunction such as substance abuse, aggression and suicide” (2018, p.1). Limited research suggests that “approximately fifteen percent of police officers suffer from PTSD symptoms” (Violanti, 2018, p.1). George Everly (2016) reports that PTSD rates for police officers are between six percent and eight percent (p.7). This begs the question, what should be done in cases where a police officer may be experiencing Post-Traumatic Stress (PTS) or Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) from a critical incident that doesn’t have a policy mandate requiring some initial diagnosis? Once again, long standing cultural practices of police officers require them to be strong, face danger, and solve other people’s problems. Many police officers are reluctant to share their feelings and deficiencies because it risks making them appear weak, incompetent and afraid. How is a police agency supposed to properly identify and successfully intervene in these circumstances? AARs may be the perfect initial step that can be used to identify the signs and symptoms of potential trauma in police officers.

Through the frequent and consistent participation in the AARs, police officers may become more comfortable talking about what happened during an incident. Being able to observe their peers speak about trauma can provide them the same opportunity. Although the primary purpose of an AAR is to identify the actions and behaviors that need to be improved or sustained, it also creates time to get to know the strengths and weaknesses of officers. Observing how officers are after an incident and comparing that to their established personalities, attitudes, emotions, responses and behaviors can provide valuable information to how they may have been affected by the incident. Making AARs a requirement in the post-incident process provides an expected and built in timeline to talking about an incident. Ellen Hendricksen (2019) states that at the “core of PTSD is avoidance,” and that “we may want to talk about it, but we don’t know what to say or how to say it” (p.1). She further explains that there are five reasons to talk about trauma, advising that people do so to get support, to make sense of what happened, to realize that you are more than your trauma, to get a reality check and to make meaning of what happened (Hendricksen, 2019, p.1-3).

Although most people believe that talking about feelings and trauma can help the healing process, some limited research suggests that intervention provides no benefit to the treatment of psychological trauma. Jonathan Bisson (2007), in an article published on Psychiatry Online, explains that:

Although psychological reactions are common after traumatic events, there is some confusion about how to best respond to them. Some clinicians have argued that early psychological interventions after traumatic events are an important aspect of a comprehensive continuum of care, while others have argued that an early application of formal psychological interventions to anyone involved has no useful role in post trauma

response and that good social support is the key to the prevention of later mental health difficulties (p.1-2).

Some of the research suggests that talking about trauma can actually make things worse. “How others react to your trauma may play a role in how you either recover or struggle...getting an initial response of blame, criticism, or denial, rather than belief and support, can inhibit a person’s ability to heal” (Hendricksen, 2019, p.1). It is in the nature of the job for police officers to try and solve someone else’s problems. If someone does talk about their trauma during an AAR it is vital that the leaders facilitating the AAR limit the ways in which feedback is given in order to avoid potentially negative consequences.

The Cochrane Collaboration studied Critical Incident Stress Debriefing (CISD) effectiveness after 9/11. They concluded that “there is little evidence to support the use of psychological intervention for routine use following traumatic events” (Collins, 2019, p.2). The study also suggested that “it may impede natural recovery” and that “professionals should cease compulsory debriefing of trauma-exposed people” (Collins, 2019, p.2). The American Psychological Association “describes psychological debriefing as having no research support and as potentially harmful” (Collins, 2019, p.2). The research conducted narrowly focused on the early and improper intervention of those who were already identified as suffering from a traumatic event. Although the research did not address AARs specifically, it did provide valuable insight into the limitations they may have. It seems that further research is required to gain a better understanding of how AARs may negatively affect those who are suffering from trauma but have yet to be identified as so. In no way is this paper intended to advocate that AARs should be a replacement for Peer Support Program or CISM intervention. They are merely

an opportunity to conduct an initial evaluation that can inform a police agency that one of their officers may need additional support or treatment.

When an AAR discussion begins to elicit the potential signs of trauma from the officers involved it creates an alert that Psychological First Aid (PSA) may be needed. The appearance of signs of trauma are normal and expected, but should be monitored to make sure they reside in a healthy and appropriate amount of time. Police agencies would benefit from incorporating mental health education and peer support groups equipped in performing PSA (Everly, 2017). The purpose of PSA as described by Collins is to:

Listen; convey compassion; assess needs; ensure that basic physical needs are met; not force someone to talk; encourage, but not force, social support; provide information; protect from additional harm; allow ventilation of feelings as appropriate for the individual; and when appropriate, refer to a mental health specialist (2019, p.4).

A police officer suffering from trauma needs to know that their symptoms are normal and expected. Once an officer is safe and stable they can be monitored until a determination can be made as to whether or not they require treatment beyond peer support. Police agencies spend a considerable amount of resources to hire healthy police officers and to train them. Isn't it just as important to keep them healthy? Knowing that it is important, who is responsible for doing so? Dr. Jarrod Sadulski (2018) writes that "in addition to hiring officers who are suitable for police work, police departments and agencies have an important role in maintaining officer health and wellness" (p.1). Frequently implementing AARs is an excellent way for a police agency and its members to consistently accept responsibility for the mental fortitude of every police officer. It is just as important to ensure that a police officer retires just as healthy as they were when they were hired.

Conclusion

Even though the After Action Review (AAR) is not the only answer to the challenge of preparing leaders for a career in policing, available information and experience shows that the frequent use of AARs will aide officers of all ranks in learning from their mistakes and preparing for future success. Officers of all ranks will share side by side in success and failure, learning from each other while taking accountability for their own actions. This not only improves individual leadership skills, it also develops and maintains a culture of leadership within the organization. Strong leadership and continuing preparedness for challenges ahead in turn allows the police agency and its officers to remain responsive and accountable to the community. AARs also assist in identifying problems that are outside statutory remedies offered by police agencies. This will create opportunities for strengthening partnerships between police agencies and other community stakeholders in order to come up with effective solutions to those problems. Last but not least, AARs offer an almost immediate opportunity for police agencies and their officers to identify signs that a fellow officer may have experienced psychological trauma. These timely alerts will allow police agencies to mobilize their peer support programs to provide psychological first aid or to refer the officer to professional psychological treatment. It is clear that AARs should be used at every opportunity. They cost absolutely nothing to use, however, the cost can be great if they aren't.

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A guide for conducting After Action Reports (AAR's)

Introduction:

The AAR focuses on individual, leadership, and unit performance. One should apply the lessons learned from an event to future events and training. An AAR must contain honest and professional dialogue. It should focus on the results of the event and help to develop a plan fix the issues. Rank does not have any place in an AAR! Everyone should be respectful, but you are all on common ground here.

AAR's can be formal or informal and can be conducted in a variety of environments. For some events you may need a private and secure space and others may be easily and quickly conducted in a parking lot. Either way, write them down!

AAR's should involve all participants. Questions should be open ended and include the: who, what, when, where, why and how. Everyone should own their mistakes as they would own what they did well. Most importantly.....everyone should check their ego at the door.

AAR Format/Guidelines:

<p>An AAR is NOT: A critique or lecture, A "gripe" session, A tool to embarrass/compare/or judge, A means to blame, It is not "storytime"</p>	<p>An AAR should be: A tool to improve performance, A tool to increase proficiency and confidence, A positive meeting (though the meeting may focus, at times, on negative aspects, a good leader conducts it in a positive way)</p>
<p>Focal Points of an AAR:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What did you think would happen, i.e. what did you expect to occur? 2. What really happened? 3. What went wrong and why? 4. What went well and why? 	<p>The 4 main parts of an AAR:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The planning phase (planning your AAR) 2. Preparation (what you need to do the AAR) 3. The actual AAR 4. Follow through (put into action what you learned in the AAR)

Example AAR Format (style and actual look of the AAR may differ):

1. Review Situation (why were you there?)
2. What was the plan? (what you thought would happen)
3. How you arrived (how did you physically get there?)
4. Actions before at the LCC (i.e. the last things you did at the last position of cover/concealment)
5. Actions on (what you did on the objective)
6. Exfil (how did you leave?)
7. Post (what happened after you left?)
8. Questions/Alibis? (give everyone a chance to hit something they forgot to mention earlier)

Hints: focusing on the: who, what, when, where, why, and how helps. You should list equipment, list resources (organic and non-organic) and any injuries that may have occurred. Include timelines. Leadership should go first (be critical of yourself). List what you think should be improved and what should be sustained.

*****There should be ZERO tolerance for character, moral, and legal issues.*****

***If you didn't bring it up in the AAR....then don't bring it up in a side bar conversation that occurs later. This is unacceptable and breaks down trust and morale. It also makes you untrustworthy and hinders your credibility when conducting or participating in future AAR's. This is quite simply, a character flaw.

After Action Review Template

<p>LEADERSHIP</p>	<p>LOCATION:</p>	<p>SUSTAIN</p>
<p>FACTS</p>	<p>IMPROVE</p>	
<p>DIAGRAM</p>		
<p>PERSONNEL</p>		
<p>ASSETS/EQUIPMENT</p>	<p>INCIDENT #/NOTES</p>	
	<p>INJURIES</p>	