

# After Action Reviews: Structure for Project Debriefs

## Why Debrief after projects?

### We all know that we feel like we're going round in circles sometimes

Stopping and assessing where we've got to helps us break out of that, and feel a bit better about our own contributions to working on a project

### We often feel like projects drag on and on

It's a good way of putting a project to bed and moving on

### We often feel that we're reinventing the wheel each time we start a new project

A good debrief process helps us remember the lessons from one project to the next  
It also helps keep the learning in the department even after people move on

### We never have time to document stuff properly

Having someone not involved in the project write up the debrief gives a great executive summary of the project that everyone can use

### It's hard to talk about things without apportioning blame

...which isn't useful. The AAR structure lets us learn without blaming.

### If its good enough for the US Military, it's good enough for us!

## The Process

### Project kickoff meeting

Authors of project requirements / Business cases / objectives documents should review recent debrief documents, or a digested list of recommendations, and turn relevant recommendations into new project objectives. This is where we reincorporate lessons learned!

### Post-Launch

#### Project manager sets up after action review

- This should occur within a month of the project end.
- Nominate a facilitator. The facilitator should be someone who was not involved in the project, who can remain neutral as issues are discussed. The debrief should never be run by project stakeholders or producers / project managers involved in the project. Never. Really.
- Invite the whole project team, plus any other involved parties from around the organisation
- Try and keep invites to people who weren't directly involved in the project to a minimum – their presence will discourage people from being open in the debrief. The debrief document can always be circulated at a later date.
- Consider running two debriefs for external projects; one internal, then a second for external contributors with the key internal people involved. However, only do this for potentially very sensitive projects; it is more valuable to have everyone in the same room at the same time.
- Think carefully about inviting executive level participants; again, they can affect people's desire to speak openly
- Allow at least two hours; more for a larger project.

- Anyone not able to attend is encouraged to write up their thoughts about the project against the same set of questions in the meeting structure; absent people are represented by the facilitator during the meet.
- The facilitator must be especially careful that absent team members are not 'blamed' for the shortfalls of the project

#### Review meeting

See meeting structure

Facilitator is responsible for taking notes and writing up the meeting

Capture the timeline constructed using a digital camera!

#### Optional: Project Scorecard

Each participant in the Project Debrief is asked to rate their experience of working on the project with a score out of ten, where 10 is a perfect, dream project, and 1 is something approximating 'would sooner hack out own eyeballs with a rusty spoon than have anything to do with a similar project in the future'. They are also asked 'what would have given this project a higher score in future?'. Scores and Comments are captured anonymously – postits work for this. Averaging the scores gives a simple numerical rating can be used as a trackable metric for 'project success' over time.

#### Publish Review Document

- Facilitator writes up document against the standard template / structure
- Draft is circulated to all participants for further comment
- Comments incorporated, and document publicly released to all involved, plus all members of the department involved, plus any other individuals identified during the debrief
- Any clear tasks that fall out of recommendations are assigned owners via the next departmental meeting / executive meeting. Ensure they're SMART: Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, and Timely

#### Roll in recommendations to objectives of forthcoming projects

- Debrief recommendations can be used to inform individuals personal objectives
- General objectives for Product owners / Project Managers can be set around raising the average project score by a certain number of points.
- Previous project debrief recommendations are considered and any relevant to new project are incorporated into objectives

## Meeting Structure

#### Introduction

Stress Anonymity, and that it's ok to speak openly. The meeting isn't about Blame; it's about learning for next time.

The principals of the review are:

- What was supposed to happen?
- What actually happened?
- Why were there differences?
- What did we learn?

#### Revisit Objectives and Deliverable

- Were objectives met?
- what did we set out to do?
- what did we actually achieve?

#### What Happened? Construct a Timeline

This happens on a large whiteboard so everyone can refer to the timeline and adjust it accordingly. Discuss:

- Tasks
- Deliverables

- Decisions
- Break this timeline down by key project areas
- Culture
    - External collaborators
    - Communication
  - Process
    - Timings
    - Deliverables
  - Content
    - Editorial / Design
    - Policy / Legal
  - Technical
    - Clientside
    - Serverside

#### What Went Well?

- Why?
- Any good recommendations to take forwards?

#### What could have gone better?

- Why?
- How can we improve that?

#### what would we do differently next time?

- Aim for concise, specific, consensually agreed statements

#### Roundup / Score

- Rate your experience of the project out of ten?
- What would have made it a ten?

## Debrief Document Structure

### Summary Recommendations

- Did the project fulfil its objectives?
- Is the output meeting its expected targets?

### Recommendations

- Culture
- Process
- Content
- Technical

### Things that Went Well

- Heroes
- Culture
- Process
- Content
- Technical

### Things we could improve upon

- Editorial / Content issues
- People / Resource issues
- Communication / Process issues
- Site Integrity / User Experience Issues
- Technical Build / Systems Integration issues
- Policy / Cultural Issues
- Business Affairs / Contracting / Legal issues

## Timeline

### Performance Figures

- KPIs
- Success Against Objectives
- Project Score Grid

### More information

[http://www.nelh.nhs.uk/knowledge\\_management/km2/aar\\_toolkit.asp](http://www.nelh.nhs.uk/knowledge_management/km2/aar_toolkit.asp)