



# Debriefings and after action reviews

By Sid Heal

Successful or not, every tactical operation yields fruit in the form of lessons learned. Accordingly, some effort needs to be made to “harvest” knowledge that can be used in bettering future operations. While methods may vary, they usually take the form of a debriefing or after action review. While slightly different in style and methodology, they share many similarities. For example, both are done after an operation or training exercise; they both include a careful examination of the components, actions and junctures of an operation; and they are both focused on improving performance.

## Debriefing

The simplest and most informal method is a *debriefing*. A debriefing is a moderated discussion focused on gaining understanding and insight regarding a specific operation or exercise and involving those people who were personally involved. Debriefings can occur with all echelons of an organization but are predominantly done at the lowest levels and include only those persons specifically involved in a given operation or exercise. Most debriefings are conducted by a person of authority or subject matter expert, and usually, but not always, without an agenda. The “moderator” normally opens the discussion with a short overview of the situation, mission and outcome before opening the topic for general discussion. The principal job of the moderator is to keep the discussion tightly focused on the specific subject while capturing the lessons learned as they become apparent. This often requires someone to act as a scribe to encapsulate the ideas and proposals in the form of bullets or short comments. Debriefings are typically of short duration, normally lasting from a few minutes to a few hours.

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While there are no rules for conducting debriefings, three conventions tend to be universal:

1. The focus of a debriefing is on fact-finding, not fault-finding. While mild criticism is to be expected, allegations of malfeasance, dereliction or negligence are reserved for more formal investigations.
2. Open discussion is nearly unlimited in scope as long as the focus remains on the operation or exercise. Consequently, any person is allowed to introduce any subject for discussion and recommendations.
3. When concluding a debriefing, the moderator often solicits input from subject matter experts and those who have not actively participated. The military often calls these comments “saved rounds”<sup>1</sup> in that they were frequently overlooked or seemed less important while discussing other matters. When this occurs, the junior and newest members of the organization are called upon before the senior members. This encourages them to speak freely without being unduly influenced by ranking officers, more experienced members or subject mat-

ter experts. Perhaps because of the limited scope of most debriefings, resulting reports, if any, are usually short; commonly only a few pages or even paragraphs.

## After action review

An *after action review* is a structured process for analyzing a particular operation or exercise and usually includes subject matter experts or superiors specifically tasked with identifying areas for improvement. After action reviews, often referred to by the initials AAR, can be either informal or formal and may be convened either before an exercise or after an operation. When convened before an exercise, the members are often referred to as a Tactical Exercise Control Group (TECG) and the ranking member is designated as the Tactical Exercise Coordinator (TEC). When convened after an operation, they tend to take the form of a commission, panel or board, and the ranking member has often been appointed by an organizational or governmental authority for the specific purpose of conducting an investigation.

Informal AAR are normally reserved for small units and for when there is no specific need or resources to conduct a more formal review. They share many of the same advantages and methods of a debriefing, especially because they are conducted by the people involved and everyone participates. Nevertheless, they are more structured than a debriefing and often have specific objectives. Consequently, they examine issues more thoroughly and may extend over several days or weeks.

Formal AAR are reserved for larger organizations in examining complex training exercises or operations resulting in calamities and may take several months. They routinely have both an agenda and a schedule. Furthermore, they are tightly focused and are often limited in scope. They

more closely resemble an investigation than any of the other methods and are the most comprehensive. Accordingly, and nearly without exception, a formal AAR requires a written report.

## IDR

There is no standard format for recording lessons learned but one format is so commonly used that it is nearly universal, especially for debriefings and informal AAR. It is popular because it is simple, clear and easy to understand. It originated with the military services, and like many military terms is often referred to by its initials, IDR, which stands for *item, discussion and recommendation*.

The IDR format is a simple, three-step process for identifying and describing issues, items or ideas with their related recommendations after a training exercise or tactical operation.

1. The *item*, issue or idea step identifies the particular subject and provides a brief

but precise description of the concern. It also serves as the title of the subject<sup>2</sup> and as such is normally just a few words and never longer than a single sentence.

2. The *discussion* is the second step and is a short summary explaining why the concern is relevant. It provides sufficient information to convince an uninformed reader of how the problem was manifested and in what circumstances and context. When more than one contributory cause is identified, they are all listed if they can be addressed by a single recommendation. The discussion component may be several paragraphs to as long as a single page. Those items that require longer explanations and descriptions are normally reserved for more formal reports.

3. The *recommendation* is the last step and is a short statement suggesting a corrective course of action, countermeasure or remedy.

The IDR format works well even when the report is lengthy. When a large number of items, issues or ideas are identified, they

are often grouped according to function, subject, area, clientele or time.

In spite of the value of debriefings and AAR, there are still administrators who see them as a waste of time. From their perspective, unless something went drastically wrong, there is nothing more to be gleaned by talking about a situation in the past. Experience may be the best teacher, but it is a harsh schoolmaster, and failing to correct mistakes ensures they will be repeated. Do not confuse good luck with good fortune.<sup>3</sup> Tactical shortcomings are measured in lives! ◀◀

## Endnotes

1. In the military services, a "saved round" refers to an unfired round that, for one reason or another, was legitimately not fired and the shooter is allowed to fire it for qualification. In a briefing or debriefing, it refers to items and issues that were not part of the agenda but that need to be brought up for consideration or notice.
2. Because it serves as a title, it is sometimes referred to as the identification (or ID) step.
3. This is a favorite saying of Lt. Ken Hubbs, San Diego Police Department and President of the California Tactical Officers Association.

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