

## After Action Review: Is It a Tool Used to Learn and Become More Effective or is it a Tool Used to Punish?

By Fred Leland



*“Because of the zero-defects mentality officers will often use caution when admitting mistakes or allowing others to criticize them; the AAR can turn into a “who shot whom” if not properly facilitated.” ~Don Vandergriff*

The After Action Review, also known as a post-decision critique, is a powerful tool for learning. These candid assessments of our actions in the aftermath of an incident can be as effective as a formalized training class or workshop on tactics, sometimes even more so. Why, then, does controversy still exist regarding the use of AARs? Why do some feel AARs are a tool for punishment or reprimand? Leadership who oppose AARs must learn to see beyond progressive discipline methods and get back to basics such as inspiring others and focusing on how to keep officers and the public safe. Inspiring others includes teaching and sharing your knowledge and experience as a leader to help develop more effective full spectrum police officers.

Frontline officers must address their resistance to AARs, as well. Why is it you feel defensive, punished or reprimanded when critiqued in an AAR? Is it that leadership has only focused on the negative and punishment for weaknesses in a response? Or is it the mindset of constantly trying to prove ourselves and the thought of sharing knowledge is futile because YOU know it all?

I ask these questions not as an attempt to chastise or lecture, but instead to highlight lessons that leadership and frontline officers can benefit from. Generally speaking, our profession does not learn from past incidents as we should. We do not seem to change our approaches, methods or tactics, even after tragic events. If you disagree with this assessment of mine then ask yourself ‘why’? What have you learned or changed after a year such as 2009 where felonious assaults on officers resulting in death were up 20%? Already in 2010 we’ve had 18 officers killed in the line of duty just in the month of January, an 80% increase. Then ask yourself when you and your fellow officers begin to heed the lessons of the fallen and learn and apply those lessons to your daily duties?

It’s imperative that, as professionals, we learn from past experiences—our own and those of others—and spend as much time discussing and analyzing lessons learned on the calls we respond to. We must open our minds to learning and teaching so we become full spectrum

police officers who focus on developing new skills, instead of a nod and a shrug. For our own sakes, as well as the lives of our partners and colleagues, we must dig deeper than a comment like, "that's was tragic" and then roll the dice on our lives. Let's use the AAR as a positive tool to teach and share lessons collectively learned so we become more effective cops who are ready for whatever lies ahead.

*"The most important piece of the After Action Review process is, participants...participate!" ~COL Casey Haskins, U.S. Army*

Stay Oriented!

Fred