

## Knowledge Management Reference Group Meeting Notes

May 29, 2013

Subject: After Action Reviews

Presenter: Major Eric Vetro, US European Command Military Liaison to USAID

Meeting Blurb: Please join the Knowledge Management Reference Group Wednesday, May 29 at 10:00am EDT in conference room 4.9.006 at the RRB. Major Eric Vetro, US European Command Military Liaison Officer to USAID, will host a discussion on how the Army's lessons learned program operates, as well as their use of After Action Reviews (AAR's). Learn how AAR's are important to your projects and how they assist you in planning future activities. Major Vetro is the US European Command military liaison officer to USAID and previously served as an analyst with the Center for Army Lessons Learned, where he was involved with the DoD's collection, processing and dissemination of lessons learned.

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Allison Watts: Today we have the pleasure to welcome Major Eric Vetro, US European Command military liaison officer to USAID. He will be talking about After Action Reviews. Please type your questions into the chat, and we will monitor the chat so that Eric can answer them later.

Major Eric Vetro: Good morning everyone on the phone and in the room, thanks for joining us. I am with the officers civilian military divisions, and I would like to talk about how we collect and disseminate information in our organization. At any time, if you have questions, please feel free to ask. I'd like this to be a discussion rather than just me talking. What I will talk about is not THE way to do things, but it is one way. It works in our culture. Look at what I am presenting today, and think about the structure in your organization and about the culture, and how some principles might be carried over. Technology is great, but it's not everything. We always look for the silver bullet, but in the end it comes down to your culture and whether an organization and its leadership supports an idea.

In the first part of my presentation, I will talk about After Action Reports, and then we can discuss what I have been telling you at the end.

After 1980, the Army started to formalize the After Action Reports process. It was a big success, and it separated us from our military peers. It enhanced our ability to examine what we did right, what we did wrong, and how the process ties into our culture, our leadership, and our education.

### What is an After Action Report:

AARs are conducted at appropriate times. Usually, that would be the end of an operation, training, or exercise, but a lot of times, our operations are sustained. So you want to periodically examine how things are going and if we are on track. AARs are professional discussions. They are not briefings, not a one-way talk between leaders and subordinates.

AARs are also not a critique or a complaint session. Everybody learns from each other during these discussions. They learn what other units have done. It is not an evaluation. I can't stress that enough. We separate AARs as far from evaluations as we can. The second people think that it's an evaluation, they will clam up and not talk. It is also not a cure for all problems.

### When is an AAR the most effective?

When it is supported by the leadership. Do it immediately, or as soon as possible; as soon as practical I should say, when the information is still in your head. Sometimes we come inside the perimeter, grab a bite to eat and drink and sit down to discuss the exercise, training or operation in an informal way. Remember to be honest, sometimes brutally honest, even if you have to tell your boss that he did something wrong. Of course, we do that in a professional, respectful manner.

### AAR guidelines:

You want opinions from everybody you bring into the discussion, from the lowest level up to the leadership. An AAR is a conversation, and different inputs might be necessary.

When we do an AAR, we review the objectives, intent, and the outcomes we were hoping for. Then you can start discussing, how did we go about accomplishing the task, how did we do, did it work. Then you can get into deeper water and discuss the impact on what you just learned.

We have formal and informal AARs. At USAID, your AARs might be mostly formal. A formal AAR has advantages: It's scheduled, on everyone's calendar, has a dedicated secretary and a moderator, which does not necessarily have to be "the boss". Sometimes, it is better to have a moderator that does not belong to the actual leadership.

Informal AARs are discussions on the side. Not even half hour after we finished the mission, we are discussing right then and there. Debriefs are very frequent for my team, and feedback is pretty instant.

### Steps of AARs:

Plan, prepare, execute, follow-up. The best AARs get out to all people who might benefit from them. They do not sit on shelves.

### AAR Structure and Methods:

AARs can be either chronological or be done by phases. Functional, I should say. We love our phases. For us, our tasks are separated by war-fighting functions. Or functional. War-fighting functions is how tasks are separated.

### ARR successes and failures:

It is important to emphasize what went well. We tend to forget about what worked, so the 10% that went wrong will overshadow all the good. Ask yourself why something worked well, what made it successful, what made it stand out. We do not focus on the fact that something went well. That's for PR. We analyze why something worked or did not work. We look at issues that came up, how it impacted us, and make recommendations for future exercises. If something worked, we recommend that it should be implemented into best practices. For example: This IDP camp faced famine and other dangers. We partnered with NGOs, did XYZ, and it worked, so we recommend to implement that into future missions.

### AAR Bottom Line:

You need an information-sharing culture. You have to find a culture that works. Even within the DOD, the culture varies. My service (Army) is very open, but others are more secretive. You have to understand the culture of your particular group. There is no USAID culture. You have the bureau culture, the mission culture, the foreign service officers and contractor culture.

What works in one situation might not work in another. Take route clearing operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, they are pretty different. What keeps you alive in Iraq will kill you in Afghanistan.

There might not be a consensus in a group. Sometimes, half of the people think that the decision that was made was right, and the other half will think that it was wrong.

Knowledge Management: We concern ourselves with how information is gathered, how it is classified, and how it can be found. It gets hard to search and find with millions of documents.

The worst thing you can put things on is a Shared Drive. In our Joint Lessons Learned System, data gets labelled and tagged.

To distribute the information, we use newsletters, alerts, blogs, wikis, liaison officers, digital distribution, e-readers, apps, etc.

### How are centers drawing lessons learned:

Through interviews, blogs, reading stuff (passive gathering), talking to people (active solicitation).

### Why are Lessons Learned important:

We want to learn from other people and from their experiences. Lessons learned are not

- evaluations or reports
- something you know
- something someone else is doing
- a manual
- war stories

Lessons learned might come from stories told, interviews conducted etc.

### Best practices:

Best practices is A way to do it, not THE way to do it. Eventually, if we see enough of this stuff, the trend, maybe it is THE way to do it, and then we make doctrinal recommendations. Best practices and lessons learned feed the manual until it's proven.

Lessons learned result in changed behavior. They can be positive and negative. I don't care how good/bad you did something. I just care WHY you did it the way you do.

### Attribution vs non-attribution:

When you collect information, interviews etc are either attributed (responded can be identified) or unattributed. Using the latter, units would open up and talk to us. Example: We conducted a study about civilian casualties, and it was attributed. This is a sensitive topic, so people did not want to talk as much. People don't want to talk if they can be identified. Unattributed interviews are better. Our leadership wants to know they truth, even if it is ugly.

### Why are AARs important:

They save money, lives, time, and keep you from having to reinvent the wheel. I can't tell you how many times I sat in a room after an exercise and thought "Why are we at this point again?"

### Barriers to lessons learned:

I am afraid to admit I made a mistake. There's not going be a big solution. It's too hard. So many lessons are already captured. Legal problems. Management only pay lip service, don't really believe it (which is something I have seen, unfortunately).

Active and passive dissemination of information:

Active dissemination is when you push out information, through email, newsletter, alerts etc.

Passive dissemination: information is just left on a web site.

It is important to find a champion that can advocate for your cause. Leadership might be in the missions and fields. Leadership does not just mean the folks here in Washington. Start small, grow slowly, small victories are important.

**Question:** Do you try to shield former AARs from evaluations?

**Answer:** We don't use them for evaluations.

**Question:** Since it is the military, if you are a soldier and your captain is at the meeting, they should not be afraid and speak up, does that happen in practice, how much of a hurdle is it?

**Answer:** I hear from my subordinates a lot, and they tell me when they think I messed something up. In a professional manner, but it happens a lot.

**Question:** How do you create a culture of people not feeling afraid, and the leadership encourages it?

**Answer:** Most of our leadership (not all) support an open culture. The better leaders open up to criticism, as long as it is tactful, respectful and focused on the current operation.

**Question:** Do you have a facilitator?

**Answer:** Yes, in a formal setting. Commander, Operations Officer etc. Might be somebody else, not the commander. Maybe the Chief of Staff.

**Question:** The ability to admit failure: How early in your career were you able to do that?

**Answer:** Right away. But focus on the positive as well, and focus on the why. Why did we make the decision? You want to learn in the end. You want a change (behavior, materials).

**Question:** Are there any retaliation for comments?

**Answer:** I would never say never, but if there is, it's clearly against our regulations. There are those who stifle it, some get away. Army promotes open leadership.

**Question:** What happens if you get to different conclusions?

**Answer:** That's fine, if they get sent up, then leaders identify trends, piecing everything together.

**Question:** Is there a process for review, follow up?

**Answer:** Yes, on the senior level we have a formal system. At the lower level, things are just being followed up. We look at doctrines every three to five years. Everybody gets a say in it. If there's a guide that's old, we send it out to see if it needs to be reviewed, and we get input. Always look up two levels so you can figure out how your intent matches with your superior. See if your office director opens up, wants to do a policy review etc. There are too many agendas (White house, State, ...). On a good day, we are all going north.

**Question:** How many people/man-hours are devoted for this?

**Answer:** For the US Army, we have 200. That includes liaison officers.

MEETING SIGN-IN SHEET				
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# **The US Army AAR & Lessons Learned Process**

**Major Eric Vetro**

**Office of Civilian-Military Cooperation**

# After Action Reviews (AARs)



Unclassified

# What Are After Action Reviews?

- **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**
- **Includes a facilitator, event participants, and other observers**
- **A professional discussion of an event that enables self-discovery for Soldiers/units**
- **Focused directly on the Commander's intent, training objectives and standards**

# Key Points

- **The AAR is Not**
  - A critique or complaint session (everyone learns from each other)
  - A full-scale evaluation (or evaluation report)
  - A cure-all for all problems
- **The AAR is Effective When**
  - Leaders support it
  - It is done immediately—by the team, for the team
  - Participants agree to be honest

# AAR Guidelines

- **Must be self-explanatory.**
- **Meets the “So What?” test.**
- **Be flexible enough to input unsolicited observations or those not previously considered.**
- **Should be staffed internally before release.**
- **Remember, others outside the chain of command may review the report.**

# AAR Fundamentals

- **Conducted during or immediately after each event**
- **Focus on Cdr's intent, training objectives and standards**
- **Focus is also on Soldier, leader and unit performance**
- **Involve all participants in the discussion**
- **Use open-ended questions**
- **Encourage initiative**
- **Determine strengths and weaknesses**
- **Link performance to subsequent training**

# Types of AARS

- **Formal**

- Requires more resources and involve more detailed planning
- A facilitator guides the review discussion, and notes are recorded
- Follows an agenda
- Formal report is presented with recommendations and actionable items



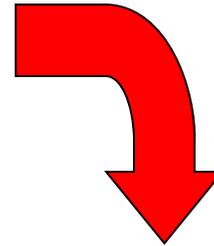
- **Informal**

- Conducted on-site immediately following an event, activity, or program.
- Carried out by those responsible for the activity
- Standard format and questions guide the discussion
- Provide instant feedback: ideas and solutions can be immediately put to use

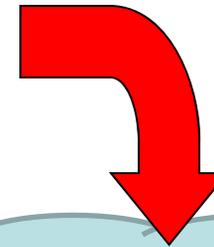


# The “Standard AAR” Process

- Step 1 – Planning
- Step 2 – Prepare



- Step 3 – Execute
- Step 4 – Follow-up



• Retraining (???)

Unclassified

# “Standard AAR”

## Plan

- select / train Ocs (OTs) / facilitators
- review training / mission plan
- identify WHEN / WHERE AARs will occur
- determine WHO will attend
- choose / prepare training / AAR aids
- review AAR plan

## Conduct

- observe and take notes
- collect observations from all OCs / observers
- organize observations / insights
- seek maximum participation
- maintain focus / review key points
- record key points of discussion / dialogue

## Prepare

- review training objective, mission OPODs / plans
- identify key events / activity to observe
- recon selected AAR site
- prepare AAR site
- conduct rehearsal

## Follow up

- identify tasks / actions “to improve”
- identify tasks / actions “to sustain”
- formulate “TTP”
- horizontal / peer sharing and integration
- vertical (higher HQ) sharing and integration
- [submit key observations, lessons to CALL](#); Army – wide and cross agency sharing and integration

*From CAC Leader’s Guide to AARs*

# AAR Structure and Methods

- **Discussion Approaches**
  - Chronological order of events
  - **Functional**
    - Movement & Maneuver
    - Intelligence
    - Fires
    - Sustainment
    - Mission Command
    - Protection
  - Examples**  
(Democracy & Governance)  
(Health)  
(Economic Growth)  
(Education)  
(Environment)  
(Policy)
- **AAR Leader Techniques**
  - Guide the discussion
  - Ask open-ended and leading questions

# AAR: Successes and Failures

- **Sustain**
  - **Strengths**
  - **What worked and went well**
- **Improve**
  - **Weaknesses**
  - **What didn't work or go well**
  - **Solutions/courses of action to solve the problem**
    - **More or better training**
    - **Better procedures**
    - **Better understanding of Army standards (doctrine, etc.)**
    - **Learn from the experience of other units**

# AAR Brief Type

## Issue/Observation – Discussion – Recommendation

- **Issue**: The media-on-the-battlefield training was poorly conceived and planned.
- **Discussion**: The role-player journalists were not sufficiently trained for the task they were to perform, and they were not resourced properly. They did not know the scenario and asked unrealistic questions.
- **Recommendation**: You must train role players for media-on-the-battlefield scenarios. Role players should be given a character description so they can act the part. They should understand the media credential system, ground rules, and the scenario in general. They should be capable of engaging in dialogue to determine the essential elements of a news story.

Source: CALL Publication 07-04, *The Media is the Battlefield* (2006)

# AAR Bottom Line

- Importance of an information sharing culture
- Focus on solutions to identified problems
- AAR is only of value outside the unit if it is a **report** – a document
- Need for KM organizations
  - to sift through AARs and document best practices/lessons
  - to broadcast critical best practices/lessons
  - to insure their integration

**Questions**

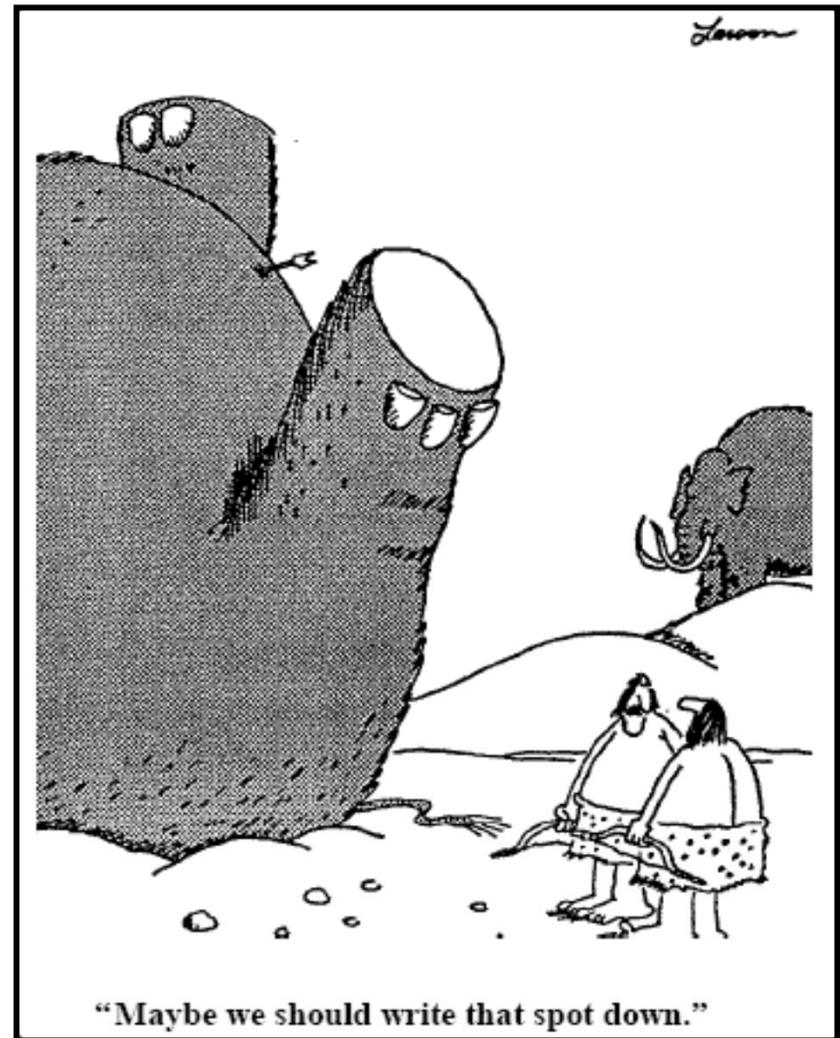
**Comments**

**Discussions**

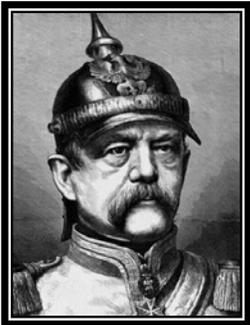
# Lessons Learned Overview



Early experiments in transportation



# Why are Lesson Learned Important?



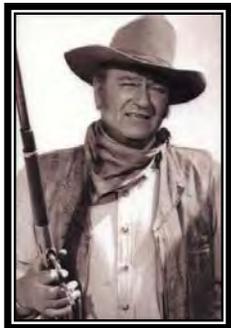
**“Fools, say they learn by experience. I prefer to profit by other people's experience.”**

**-Otto von Bismarck (1815–1898)**



**“You must learn from the mistakes of others. You can't possibly live long enough to make them all yourself.”**

**-Sam Levenson (1911-1980)**



**“Life is tough pilgrim but it's tougher if you're stupid.”**

**-John Wayne (1907-1979)**

# What is a Lesson Learned?

It is ***not***:

- A report
- An evaluation
- Something you know
- Something someone else is doing
- A manual
- “War stories”

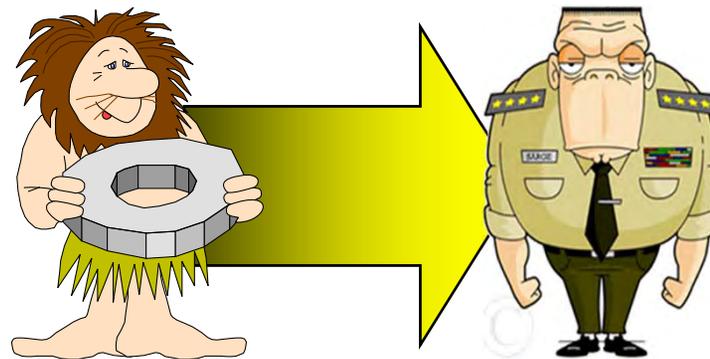
# What is a Lesson Learned?

- A lesson learned is validated knowledge derived from actual experience, observation, and analysis of training, exercises, and operations that results in changed behavior
  - Can be positive or negative experience
- Lessons learned are actions because the learning isn't complete *until it is demonstrated!*

# Why are Lesson Learned Important?

- **Learning from our mistakes saves:**
  - Lives
  - Money
  - Time
  - And, it just makes sense!
- **It also prevents:**

“Reinventing the Wheel!”



# Why are Lesson Learned Important?

## **Bottom Line**

- **Promote successful outcomes**
- **Preclude the recurrence of unsuccessful outcomes**

# Barriers to Lessons Learned



# **Impediments to Lessons Learned**

- **The “needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few” mentality**
- **Traditions**
- **Appearances**
- **Group-think**
- **Stockholm syndrome**
- **Laziness**
- **Uncertainty**
- **Lack of willingness to accept facts**
- **Willingness to accept status quo**

# Results of Lessons Learned

- **Changes in the way we operate**
  - New or innovative technique shared and accepted as common practice
  - New policies or doctrine
  - Changes in safety applications
  - New equipment or innovative use of old equipment
  - New organization or change to organizational structure
  - New or revised training practices or policies
  - DOTMLPF
- **How the change is applied is what makes it a lesson learned**

# DOTMLPF

**D**octrine

**O**rganization

**T**raining

**M**aterial

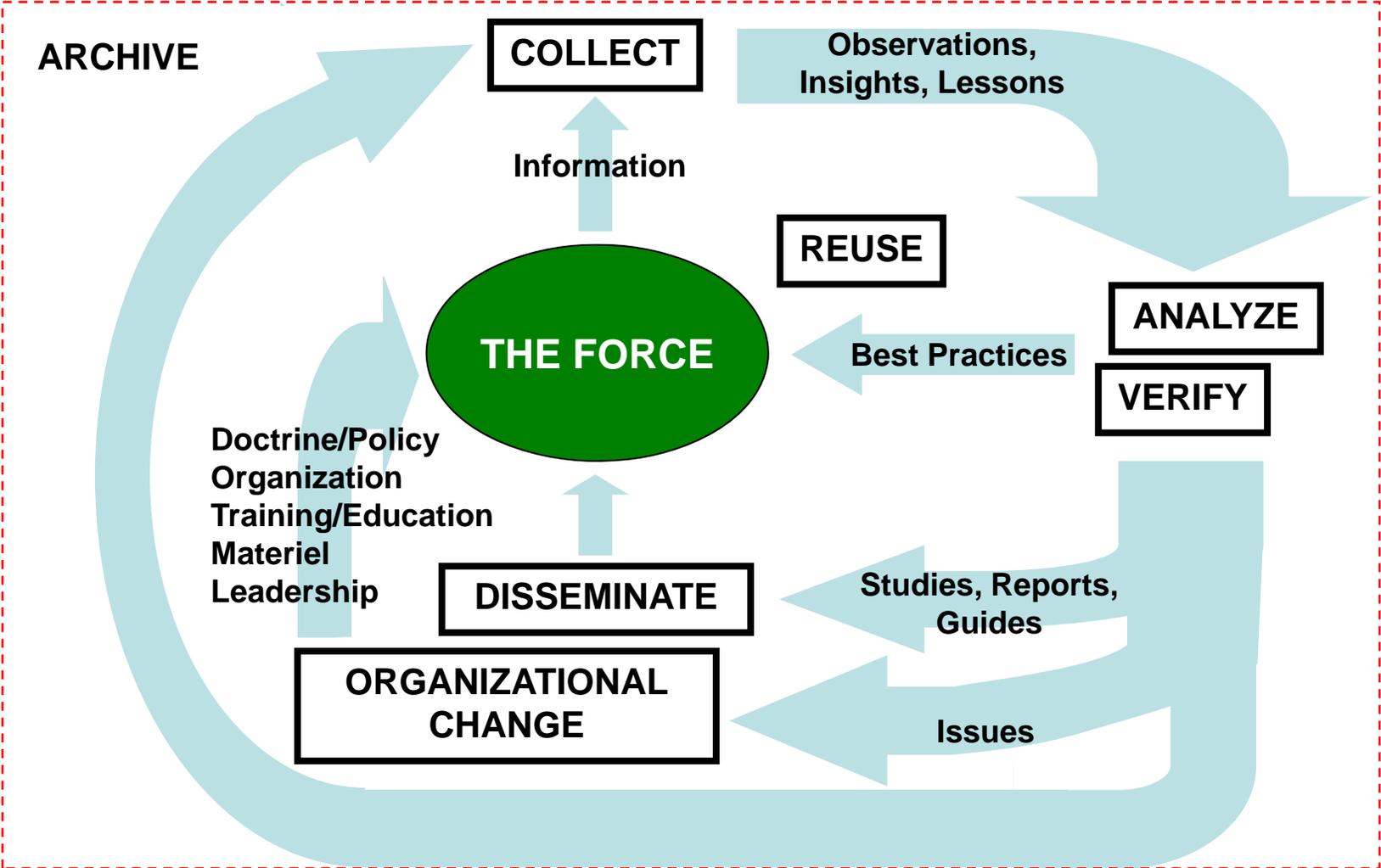
**L**eadership

**P**ersonnel

**F**acilities

**What would work for your  
agency?**

# Lessons Learned Process



# Definitions

## OILs

- **O**bservations – conditions experienced during training or operations
- **I**nsights – issues that arose while conducting training or operations
- **L**essons – potential solutions to the problems experienced under set conditions

# Definitions

## OILs

- **O**bservations – describe conditions
- **I**nsights – give the why
- **L**essons – provide the way forward

# Definitions

- **O**bservations – describe conditions
- **I**nsights – give the why
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*An OIL is not simply restating or paraphrasing existing doctrine, policy, process, etc.*

# Collection

- **Focuses on collecting OILs from many sources internal and external to the organization**
- **Collection types**
  - **Unsolicited Contribution**
  - **Passive Collection**
  - **Active Collection**

# Definitions

- **Best Practice** – Activity or procedure that has produced outstanding results in one situation and could be adapted to improve effectiveness in another situation
- **Tactics** – Near term actions taken to solve specific problems or accomplish specific goals.
- **Techniques** – General and detailed method used to accomplish a task
- **Procedures** – Particular courses or modes of action for performing certain functions

# Dissemination

- **Focuses on distribution of OIL**
  - Define and provide users a feedback cycle for a typical OIL
  - User access
  - Search functions
- **Passive and Active Dissemination**

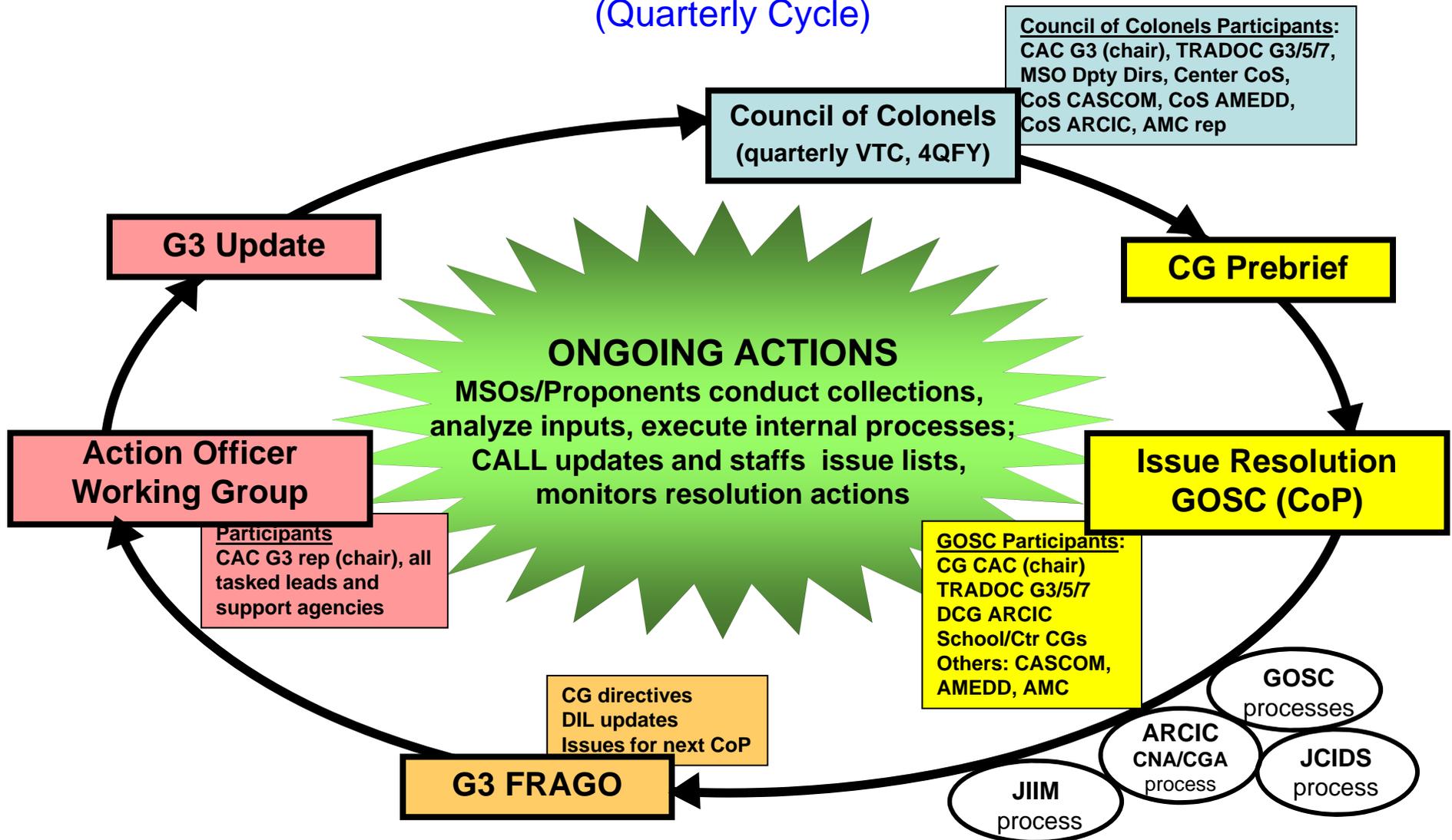
**Passive Dissemination: No User Action = No Dissemination**

# Dissemination Methodology

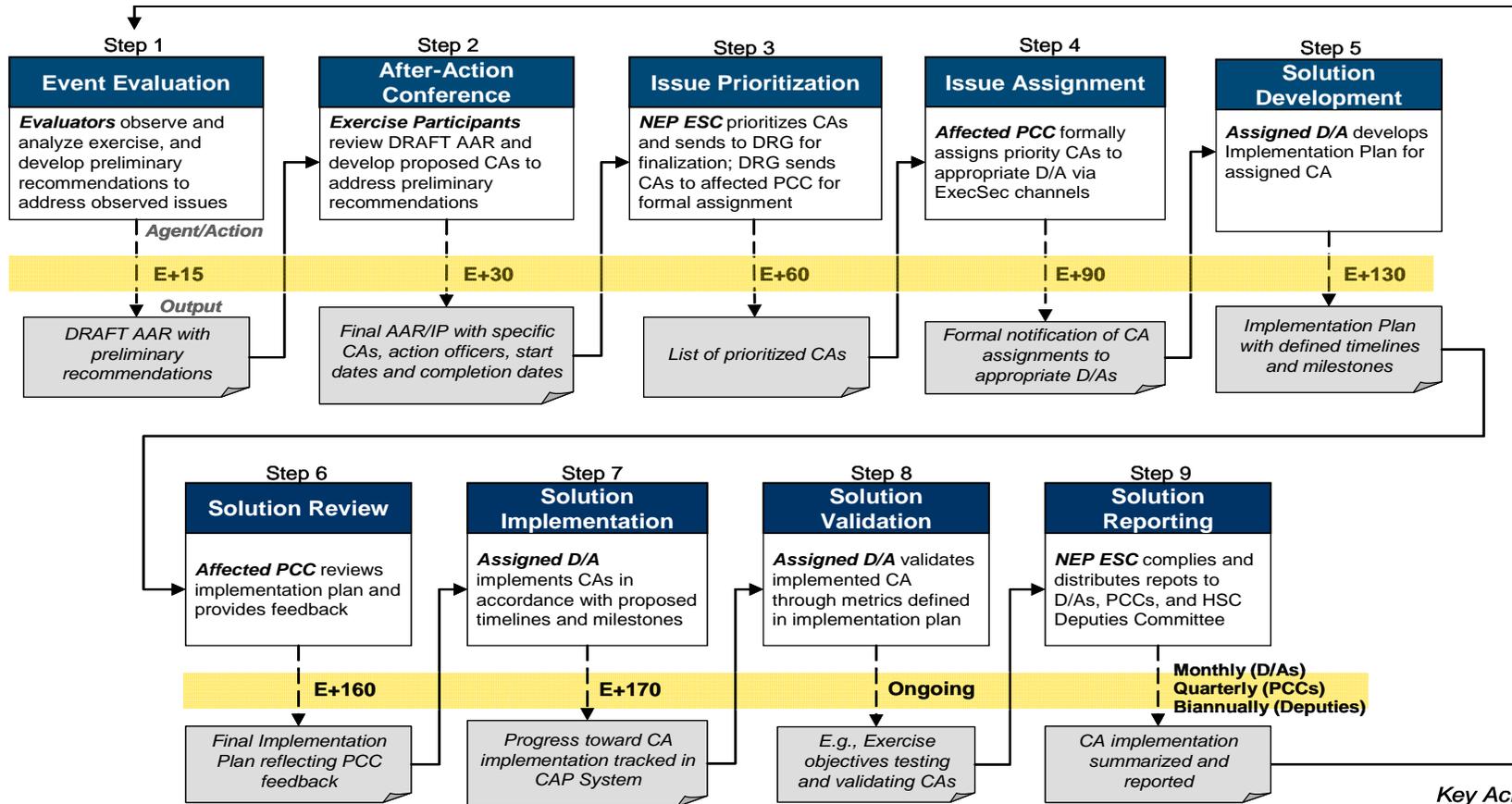
- **Champions**
- **Networks**
- **Guidance Materials and Databases**
  - **Collection Reports**
  - **Tactics, Techniques, Procedures Guides**
  - **Studies**
  - **Information Systems**

# CAC Issue Resolution Process

(Quarterly Cycle)



# DHS Interagency Corrective Action Program (CAP) Process



## Key Acronyms

- After-Action Report (AAR)
- Improvement Plan (IP)
- Corrective Action (CA)
- Department/Agency (D/A)
- Homeland Security Council (HSC)
- Executive Secretary (Exec Sec)
- DRG (Domestic Readiness Group)

# Why Archive

- **Ensures no information or knowledge is lost**
- **Allows information that can be reanalyzed, reworked, and compared with contemporary data**
- **Become resources for historical research**

# Archive Methodology

- **User-centered context**
  - Easily searchable
  - Quick
  - All encompassing
- **No “silver bullet”**

# Marketing Lessons Learned

- Leadership “buy-in”
- Avoid the “evaluation” tag
- Push best practices out
- Start small then grow *slowly*
- Show the process can bring change

**Advertise Lesson Learned**

**Questions**

**Comments**

**Discussions**

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