ReThink Health
A RIPPEL INITIATIVE

VENTURES

Building a Learning Practice

Tool Summary

1. Introduction: Objectives, Benefits, and Results

This tool leads partnerships through the core principles of emergent learning, including how to use framing questions to focus learning, using two tools: (1) the Before Action Review (BAR), which begins by asking what our intended outcome is, what success will look like, and the plan to plan to produce the desired health system transformation; and (2) the After Action Review (AAR), which asks what insights will be taken forward to future change efforts. Developing a Learning Practice will support development of all the Inclusive Health Value Plan components and experimentation with prototypes throughout Ventures. Your team's Learning Practice will be supported through regular BARs, AARs, and use of the Ventures Progress Platform to track accomplishments, key learnings and insights, and future plans.

2. Delivery Recommendations

Facilitation Type	Preparation	Set-up	Staffing	Time
Coach-led	Coach develop BAR and AAR questions and implement regularly; share BAR/AAR PPT	Seating in circle or using live video conference	1-2 coaches facilitate	10-30 minutes for a BAR or AAR
Staff/Leader-led	Staff/leader develop BAR and AAR questions and implement regularly; share BAR/AAR PPT	Seating in circle or using live video conference	1-2 staff or partnership leaders facilitate	10-30 minutes for a BAR or AAR

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Building a Learning Practice

Tool

If learning is fundamentally about continually expanding our capacity to create the future to which we aspire, then by definition our learning must evolve as that future emerges. Emergent Learning is about designing a process to enable groups to continue to learn from their experiences, as that experience unfolds.

Learning Objectives

- To understand how emergent learning is used for continuous learning that emerges from the work itself
- To develop an emergent learning practice for your effort using the Before Action Review (BAR) and After Action Review (AAR) tools

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How to use this tool

This tool leads you through the core principles of emergent learning, including how to use framing questions to focus your learning, followed by two tools: (1) the Before Action Review (BAR), which begins by asking what our intended outcome is and what success will look like and ends with a plan to produce it; and (2) the After Action Review (AAR), which stops to ask if you got there and what insights you plan to take forward. It turns work into a deliberate learning experiment.

This tool is most effective when completed by people deeply engaged in the regional change effort and well-informed about all its activities, such as those who are part of the core stewardship team leading the effort or part of the backbone or integrator organization.

Emergent Learning

Emergent Learning is learning practice that emerges from the work itself. Its tools and practices support surfacing, capturing, and employing those insights to inform future work. These things help train our thinking process so that we make decisions and take action based on deeper and more robust hypotheses about what it will take to achieve the future to which we aspire.

At ReThink Health, we have explored ways to deepen our reflection and understanding about health care and the complex and dynamic environment in which it operates, in order to ask better questions; gain a more systemic, more sustainable perspective; and take more robust action. But it would be a mistake to think that "deep reflection" equates with "right answers" that simply need to be implemented. All of us aim to create change in a dynamic environment with partners and stakeholders who view the world through their own eyes and use their own experience and thinking to make their own informed decisions; and so they should and always will. Their thinking will be different from yours and will evolve based on their own experience, as will yours.

Therefore, it is not enough to gather once, or even once a year, to reflect together. The tools and practices of emergent learning are designed to help people who have different perspectives engage with each other at the beginning of a project or initiative and during the work itself, as often as needed, in ways that are as simple as possible, to reflect and adjust their thinking as the situation unfolds.

Framing the Learning Practice

In a complex environment, there is quite literally too much to learn. We begin an emergent learning practice by identifying a handful of learning priorities—a fundamental, pernicious challenge; a high-leverage opportunity; a critical link in a logic model or theory of change—and build a plan to learn from the work itself. The question to ask is this:

> ***If we could master only one thing this year, what would make the greatest contribution to creating the change to which we aspire?***

Testing Out Assumptions and Theories of Change

A great place to start is by exploring your own strategic plan, logic model, or theory of change, and the assumptions underlying it.

One simple way to look at logic models, theories of change, or strategy documents is that they all consist of a series of "if/then" hypotheses: "**IF** we make (this) decision or take (this) action, **THEN** we expect to achieve (that) result." In a sense, every hypothesis—whether part of a grand strategic plan or a two-hour meeting design—breeds another hypothesis: "Well, what would it take to do that?"

Thinking in this way makes it easier to test out hypotheses in practice. The "if" is the decision or action; the "then" is how you would recognize success. The Before Action Review (BAR) described below begins by asking what our intended outcome is and what success would look like and ends with a plan to produce it. The After Action Review (AAR) stops to ask if you got there and what insights you plan to take forward. It turns work into a deliberate learning experiment.

Using Framing Questions to Train Your Focus

A **framing question** translates a learning priority (challenge, opportunity, or hypothesis) into a question that keeps people's attention focused as they work. It encourages people to explore new ideas. It also helps bring a community of partners together in an attitude of inquiry. Lastly, repeating it at the beginning of a BAR or AAR (see below) helps focus reflection.

Selecting an effective framing question is a bit of an art. The best framing questions typically take the form of "What would it take to…?" or "How can we…?" Let's say, for instance, that a community health initiative is continually running into roadblocks and delays because of disagreements among key community stakeholders.

Problem Question	Why	Better Question
Why don't our stakeholders support this approach?	Retrospective and analytical questions result in debate and fault-finding, but no movement forward.	What will it take on our part to get our stakeholders to support this initiative?
How do you build stakeholder alignment?	Big, abstract questions tend to lead to big, abstract conversations.	How can we help our stakeholders agree on a common goal for this initiative?
What will it take to get the clinic director and the mayor to kiss and make up?	Questions with embedded assumptions about the cause of a problem limit the group's focus and options.	What will it take on our part to help key stakeholders listen to and understand each other's needs?
How can we develop a good briefing document for the community?	Questions with embedded solutions limit the team's options and may be seen as trivial or irrelevant.	How can we ensure that we are communicating effectively with the community on an ongoing basis?
How can we communicate our message, get buy in, and build momentum on our schedule so that slips do not impact ultimate deliverables?	Compound questions make the team learning process unnecessarily complex.	How can we ensure that delays caused by external circumstances do not impact our ultimate deliverables?

Turning Work into a Learning Experiment

We attend a thought-provoking workshop or read a book that challenges our thinking. Then we leave and turn our attention back to our "to do" list. Without a concrete way to experiment with new ideas in our real work, learning becomes theoretical. Increased awareness + no improvement = frustration.

It is in doing the things that we do on an everyday basis that we either: (1) learn and improve or (2) just move through the motions on the way to the next deadline: making decisions, meeting with stakeholders, conducting routine health procedures, rotating shifts, etc. These routine events can be seen opportunities to conduct a learning experiment. Think about your framing question(s): what events or activities in your regular work would lend themselves to your trying new ideas?

Look for especially important upcoming events. These events offer great opportunities to help a group where it will matter most to them. (This is in contrast to starting with a post-mortem of a one-time project when everyone in the room just wants to get on to their next project.) Look for repeated events. These provide a built-in opportunity to test out a group's thinking, see how it works, refine its approach, and try again. If you can improve something your group does on a repeated basis, the group will quickly see the benefit of a learning practice for themselves and start to look for other opportunities to try out new thinking deliberately.

Putting It All Together to Improve Practice

To summarize, an emergent learning practice identifies a learning priority, frames it as a question, identifies opportunities to test out ideas, and employs simple tools like Before Action Reviews and After Action Reviews to test out ideas in practice. Over time, it helps a group deepen its understanding of what causes a persistent challenge or how to best take advantage of an important opportunity and how to work together to learn and improve.

You can even use BARs and AARs to track the progress of the practice itself. You can bring the group together in a more intensive BAR as you get started in order to get everyone's thoughts on the table. Periodically, you can use these tools to step back and reflect on what you have learned over the past month or quarter and cast forward for the next month or quarter to what you want to focus on learning and what the opportunities are to test out new ideas.

Convening Stakeholders to Learn Together from Everyone's Experience

Too often, a meeting intended to bring stakeholders together to learn from each other's experiences translates into a series of presentations with no real effort being made to create deeper insight or to think about what it would take to apply ideas to your own work.

What would it take to turn these gatherings into true peer learning sessions that help the whole community get better at achieving the outcomes they share? Emergent learning tools and practices can help bring participants together as "experts in equal measure."

A framing question can create a theme for the meeting and a tone of mutual inquiry. It helps participants decide which stories to share. It increases the potential to deepen insight by comparing and contrasting stories in dialogue. In what ways are our experiences similar? How are they different? What meaning do we make of these similarities and differences? What other ideas do these comparisons suggest?

Participants can use the AAR format to prepare to reflect on their experience around the framing question – the story behind their success or their failure. They can use the BAR format to think about how what they have heard might apply to their own situation.

Before and After Action Reviews (BARs and AARs)

Before Action Reviews (BARs) were created to replicate some of the behind-the-scenes preparation the U.S. Army uses to set the stage for effective learning. **After Action Reviews (AARs)** were developed by the U.S. Army after the humbling experience of Vietnam to involve every soldier in the process of reshaping the army into a more skillful, adaptive organization. It has helped them prepare for new kinds of missions, such as conducting peacekeeping in Haiti and offering humanitarian assistance in Rwanda. It has been used extensively in both Iraq and Afghanistan.

The BAR/AAR tool is so simple and flexible that it has been adopted by public agencies to learn from major crises, corporations to improve performance, and foundations and nonprofits to improve social outcomes. But, like so many things that look impossibly simple on the surface, there is an art to using BAR/AARs well. Fourth Quadrant Partners has intensively studied the masters who created and refined this simple tool over the past 25 years.

Before Action Reviews

Purposes and Outcomes

The primary goal of the BAR is to make sure that everyone is on the same page with regard to intent, thinking actively about how to affect outcomes, taking into account past lessons and ideas, and aware that there will be an AAR to reflect on results. The BAR goes beyond the "plan on paper" and asks "what else will it take?" and "what else can we try?"

A BAR asks group members to:

1. Declare their intended outcome and how they will recognize success;
2. Think together about what challenges they predict and draw on insights from their past experiences; and
3. Develop a plan for achieving their outcome in the face of predicted challenges.

Participants

A BAR should involve those people who have their hands on the task. If not everyone can attend, it is more valuable to hold a BAR with the people who can be there than to cancel it.

Preparation

In most cases, the only preparation required is a flip chart or a notepad for taking notes. An optional template has been provided below. For large or complex events and activities, any planning documents, including goals, schedules, and metrics, should be available. If a theory of change or logic model has been created, that should also be available. A visual timeline of the plan may be a valuable coordinating tool.

Using this tool

Use the worksheet below to record notes from each question in the BAR.

In every organization we have worked with, the weak link in the learning process is between reflection and planning. Being rigorous about looking back helps to strengthen the link and ensure that you don't keep learning the same lessons over and over.

Before Action Review

1. What is our intended result?

This may be as simple as reviewing the goals for an initiative launch or stakeholder meeting. Without a clear, shared intent, it will be difficult to compare intent with actual results.

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2. What are our success measures?

In your AAR, you will use your success measures to compare intended versus actual results—a very important part of the learning conversation. Your measures may be quantitative (meeting deadlines, budgets, quality standards; receiving funding; performing to standard) or qualitative (having every voice heard; having a clear idea of who will do what by when; gaining stakeholder commitment). The more concrete the metric, the easier it will be to compare intent and results in your AAR.

3. What challenges will we face?

This is the last chance to get real and use the group's past experience to predict what is likely to get in the way and to plan for it. Are there predictable scheduling bottlenecks to plan for? Is there a point in your process where you always seem to fall behind schedule? Are you likely to experience resistance from a particular stakeholder? Do you typically forget to keep certain key people in the loop? Your framing questions may guide you to focus on one particular dynamic that you want to work on changing.

4. What did we learn from last time?

If any lessons exist from past activities conducted by this group or from similar activities conducted by other organizations, this is the time to bring them into the conversation. The goal is not to exhaustively replicate every idea proposed by someone in the past but to realistically plan for stumbling blocks identified in the previous step and to **identify one good idea** that you can try to address each.

5. What do we think will make us successful this time?

What is the one thing the group could do that you predict will make the biggest difference in its results? **Create an experiment.** Think through any additional plans it will take to try this out. Because you will be conducting an AAR afterward, you will have a perfect opportunity to ask yourselves, "Did it work?"

After Action Reviews

Purpose and Outcomes

In practice, many organizations only hold an AAR at the end of a project or initiative. These intensive AARs are seen as stand-alone events whose purpose is to extract and document all of the possible "lessons learned." These are actually "postmortems" and serve a different purpose than a true AAR.

The primary purpose of an AAR is to work together to consciously test out and refine a group's thinking and actions in a timely way within the work itself, while there is still an opportunity to correct course and improve the outcomes of a project or initiative.

An AAR is conducted after an event or a small piece of action. It asks those who had their hands on the action to get together to:

1. Compare what they intended to accomplish and what actually happened
2. To reflect on what caused their results
3. To identify "sustains and improves" for next time

Facilitation Tips

Remember that the goal of a single AAR is to get better, not to thoroughly review every aspect of an event or activity. As with BARs, longer, more complex AARs will benefit from skilled facilitation. Shorter AARs can and should be self-facilitated, especially if the availability of a facilitator complicates scheduling.

Good preparation and good meeting management is the first step. Everything you already know about running an effective meeting applies here. Beyond that, here are a few basic rules to keep in mind:

- There is no more powerful way to set the tone before an AAR than to counsel the leader of the group to acknowledge something that she or he could have done better.
- Remember that this is the group's meeting, not yours. Stay focused on what they want to understand and improve, not what you think they should.
- Help the group stay focused on their own responsibilities, rather than shifting the blame to people not present. Register complaints in a parking lot and shift the focus back to what they can address themselves. Finish the meeting with a plan to address issues outside of their scope of responsibility.
- Design and facilitate the meeting so that participants do most of the talking. Your goal is not to teach the team but to help them learn themselves.
- When the conversation strays, use any visuals you've prepared to bring the team back to its intent and ground truth.
- Ask the team to identify what worked as well as what didn't work.
- Help the group to avoid generalizations and get as specific as possible. When a participant makes a broad assessment (such as "leadership is to blame"), ask for an example.
- When the conversation turns into advocacy for different points of view, ask each party to "ground" his or her point of view with the data. Focus on the next opportunity and get the team to choose one alternative to test out. Because this is part of a learning practice, you can always try out another alternative next time.

Participants

An AAR should generally involve the same people who conducted the BAR—the people who had their hands on the work itself. Organizational leaders who did not participate in the activity may request to participate in the AAR. If and how they participate should depend on the culture and level of trust in the group.

Preparation

For simple AARs, nothing more than a flip chart or a pad of paper is needed for taking notes. For AARs of complex work or involving many participants, preparing visual aids—such as agreed-upon goals for the activity, key metrics and performance against them, and process maps—will help participants step back through decisive moments. It will help them come away with a much more accurate understanding and a much more targeted and high-leverage set of insights to apply next time.

Using this tool

Use the worksheet below to record notes from each question in the BAR.

Use a timeline to help move from generalizations to specifics. For more complex AARs, if you have a prepared timeline, it can be helpful to hand out sticky notes and ask participants to take a moment to write down their own thoughts about what happened when and why, and to get up one at a time and place it on the timeline. Even if you are reviewing a simple event, it can be useful to break your reflection down into sections (before/during/after, morning/afternoon, etc.). Some key insights may come from thinking about what happened (or didn't) before you stepped into the room.

After Action Review

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1. What is our intended result? If you did a BAR, it should take very little time to restate what you agreed to in advance. If a participant questions the intent, rather than debating it here, include that as a topic for the third question.	
2. What were our actual results? If you have been able to document this prior to the AAR and prepare a chart or other visual record, this step will also not take very long, though participants should be encouraged to challenge your assessment of the results. Discussion about results should always reference intent and success measures: "We said we were going to do X. Did we do it?" If a discussion does get started, it will invariably drift into the question of "why?" Defer that to the third question.	
3. What caused our results? This is the meat of the reflection process. Depending on how much time you have, you can go deep into understanding causes, or you can focus on top-of-mind highlights. Sometimes the answer is that the group did not get a chance to try out its thinking. This is not uncommon. But **everything feeds back into the AAR process,** so it is perfectly valid to ask "Why not? What would it have taken to try that out and how could we make sure that we try it out next time?	
4. What lessons should we take forward for next time? The ideal outcome of this step is to find up to three of the most powerful insights or ideas that this group could take forward to improve its performance in its next opportunity. Consciously looking forward to the next opportunity helps to strengthen the weak link between reflection and planning.	

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