# KM Approaches Methods and Tools – A Guidebook

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# Introduction

## KM Techniques for Projects, Collaboration, Expertise

In 2008 we published our *KM Method Cards*, a set of brief descriptions of 80 approaches, methods and tools that can be used to support knowledge transfer and learning.

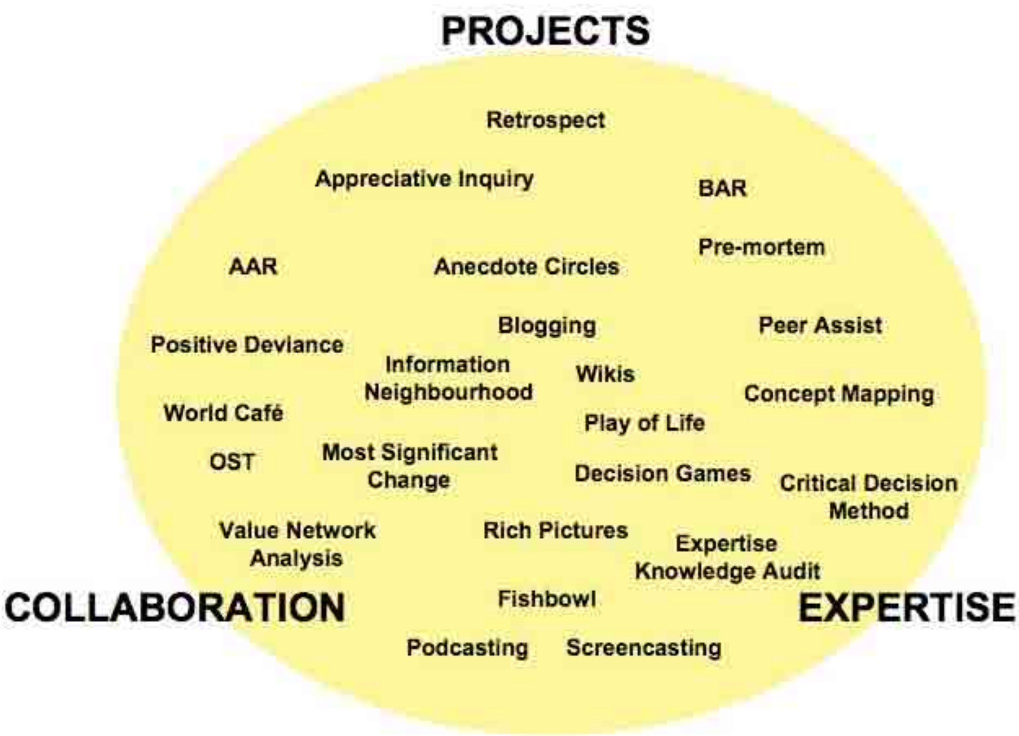
This book provides more detailed guidance on 24 of those approaches, methods and tools, selected because of their usefulness in supporting three very common areas of work where knowledge transfer, capture and learning are important:

- Learning through **projects**, activity cycles and case based work
- Promoting peer **collaboration**, networking and communities across workgroup boundaries
- Identifying, eliciting, representing and transferring **expertise**

We have invented none of these techniques, though we have pioneered the adaptation of some of them for specifically knowledge management purposes.

They have been developed by practitioners from several disciplines over many years. What we've done here is simply gathered them into a single compilation, structured as an easy to use "how to" guide, and specifically framed in a way to make them helpful for promoting knowledge sharing, learning and transfer in support of projects, collaboration and expertise.

We selected the techniques for their adaptiveness to different circumstances and needs. Hence many of them can be used for all three of our knowledge transfer purposes. The diagram below shows the likely affinity of each of the techniques for the three broad programmes of project learning, collaborative knowledge sharing and expertise transfer.




## Ease of Implementation vs Usefulness

The techniques vary in terms of their ease of implementation. Some of them, like AARs, are both simple to conduct, and relatively easy to organize. Others, like Wiki adoption or even organizing a World Café, require the support and collaboration of more people. Others, like the Critical Decision Method interview, are technically difficult to perform.

In some cases, your organization will already be practising something similar. For example you may already be conducting project "post mortems" or reviews. It's worth checking however whether these practices are structured, conscious and disciplined – are they really achieving knowledge transfer and learning, or are they simply processes where people go through the motions?

If the former, then use them as models and build on them. If the latter, then what looks like a relatively easy technique to implement, eg the AAR, might turn out to be more difficult because people will easily associate it with an existing bad habit around which cynical attitudes have grown up.

This is why we stress the importance throughout this Guidebook of being clear about what your purpose is in using the technique, and being rigourous about following up to make sure it provides practical value for the business. It's not simply about performing the techniques contained in this Guidebook, it's about using them and deploying their output to improve the way that business is being done in your organisation.

It is especially important with the more complex or difficult techniques, that you deliver some value from the time spent and people engaged. Experts' time is expensive. Getting buy-in and harnessing the time and attention of large numbers of people is expensive. You had better be clear that your use of the technique is delivering some value. In the diagram above we suggest the degree to which technical difficulty and the need to get buy-in interact, and how this relates to the need to be able to deliver solid business value.

## Getting Started

For some of the easier techniques, you should be able to try them out quite successfully on your own using this Guidebook and the additional resources listed in each section, to help you. For the more difficult ones, especially the interview based techniques, you may need some formal training and coached practice to get you started.

It's a good idea to have a group of peers also trying the same techniques, so that you can learn from each other's experience and use each other as peer coaches. For example, you could invite a colleague to observe you in trying a technique, and then give feedback (and return the favour at another time!). This will accelerate your learning and give you insight into different styles of implementation.

The beauty of many of these techniques is their adaptability. They can be simplified, extended or applied in a variety of ways. We recommend, however, that when you start out, try not to over simplify too quickly. Get used to practising the full techniques first, and then when you are proficient, comfortable and confident, you will be able to improvise and adapt them much more fluently and effectively.


## Acknowledgements

*We would like to acknowledge the help of Paolina Martin and Ng Wai Kong in compiling this Guidebook, the many clients who have asked us the questions we have tried to answer here, and the inventors, practitioners and sharers of the techniques listed here. This is a book about knowledge sharing, but is also at its heart, a product of knowledge sharing.*

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# 1. After Action Review

## What is an After Action Review?

An After Action Review or AAR is a short, facilitated meeting of the participants in an activity that may have revealed something useful to learn.

## Why use it?

Conducted at key points during a project or regular work cycle, AARs can facilitate the capture of important lessons learnt by team members. And making these lessons learnt available to the rest of the organisation will mitigate against the same mistakes being repeated or ensure that an opportunity spotted or a good practice that emerges in one situation can be used elsewhere.

Other possible objectives of AARs may include:

- keeping the team on the same page, maintaining a common understanding of what has occurred and its implications
- picking up changes that need to be made to the team's methods and approaches, so they can respond to unanticipated events in a coordinated way
- finding improvement suggestions that feed back into processes or policies at the corporate level
- identifying good practices, workarounds or things to watch out for (traditionally known as lessons learned) for other teams to have access to.

## How to use it?

*Step 1: Identify the Learning Objective*

AARs might be scheduled or unscheduled. In either case you want to be clear about your learning objective. What just happened that you want to learn from?

*Step 2: Gather the Team*

Try to make sure all the members of your team and any other key players in the incident under review are present so that (a) you get all the relevant insights and viewpoints, and (b) you can use the AAR to help maintain common understanding for future working.

*Step 3: Conduct the AAR*

The group answers (and should usually record in an AAR repository or a team journal) the four questions:

> "What did we expect to happen?"
> "What actually happened?"
> "Why the differences?"
> "What can we learn from this?"

AARs should not just focus on what went wrong. The aim of an AAR is not to assign blame for what went wrong but rather to find out the areas that can be improved in future or for other teams. Things that went better than expected are also important because they might represent opportunities for future projects.

The facilitation style is very important, and especially when you are looking at things that did not go as well as expected, it should focus on events and actions, not on individuals, to avoid provoking defensive behaviours and finger pointing.

For this reason it is far better for tricky AARs if the facilitator is not on the core team that were involved in the action. They can be more objective and focus on clarifying the facts of the case with less risk of making people feel defensive.

*Step 4: Decide on Any Follow Up Actions*

If you have identified insights that other people need to know about, you need to make sure they get to know them. Do you need to change any procedures or guiding documents? Do you need to document the lessons and make them available to others, or conduct a briefing? Make sure that what you have learned is transferred, and not just kept in your team's heads.

***A Note on Facilitation*** If you have a culture of learning and open communication in your team or organisation, then AARs can be adopted very easily. The less open your team or organisation is, or the more sensitive the learning area in the action being reviewed, then the more important are the skills of your **facilitator**.

As a facilitator, you want to ensure that all views are heard, not just the dominant voices or the authority voices. An external facilitator is useful in tricky AARs, because they can ask "stupid" naive questions as an outsider and uncover fresh perspectives. If necessary, use post-it notes for people to do silent brainstorming of improvement ideas, and then cluster the ideas (also silently). You will probably find that people are more willing to discuss learnings and improvements around clusters of ideas like this. Keeping the tone positive is an essential skill. Especially in tricky AARs, the technique called **Appreciative Inquiry** is a useful one to use.

Make sure the AAR is short and sweet, to encourage people to see the value in relation to the effort. If you make a promise to have a 10 minute AAR, then keep to that promise, even if it means you have to reconvene the meeting at another time.

It's useful to start your session by setting out the expectations and some simple ground rules, especially when your team is not yet used to conducting AARs.

***Recording the Outcomes*** If the outcome of the AAR is something that is worth recording and passing on to other people, make sure you have a process for getting the lessons into a repository that people have access to. Also make sure that it is recorded in a form that is easy to digest and read quickly, and that it is indexed with keywords that people are likely to find! It's a good idea to have a template for recording your lessons learned - make sure that it has a short narrative context as well as the list of bullet points for lessons learned. The narrative context will help the reader understand how the lessons can be applied.

## When to use it?

AARs can be used in projects, in case-based work, or in regular activity cycles. Use AARs at logical review points where significant events have been happening and you want your team to be all on the same page, or when something unexpected has happened that you want to learn from.

AARs can be conducted at key milestones during a project, eg, midpoint review, project closeout, or at the end of each major deliverable. They can also be conducted whenever something unexpected (good or bad) occurs in a case, project or activity cycle, so that the team can figure out quickly what the learning opportunities are and make any necessary changes to their processes.

AARs are often also conducted at the end of a project as a "post mortem". However they are not so useful here; they are most useful if they are conducted as close to an incident as possible, where the team's memory is fresh. The four key questions are designed to zoom in on particular actions and events and get the learning from the consequences. For an overall learning review of an entire project, **Retrospects** are a much more appropriate format to use.

## When not to use it?

AARs should never be mechanical exercises. If there isn't a clear learning objective and outcome from conducting the AAR, don't use it. An AAR should never be conducted just for form's sake. If it is, you risk people becoming cynical about the value of doing AARs. When that happens, AARs will not be conducted properly and important lessons will be lost.

## Examples

AARs were pioneered by the US Army, but locally, the Singapore Police Force (SPF) has a strong discipline in conducting AARs. SPF officers not only conduct AARs at the end of every project, but also at the end of each corporate planning cycle.