Learning Log and After-Action Review

Understand what happened, capture what you learned, and carry it forward

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Why this matters

Most people move on too quickly. A decision ends, an outcome arrives - and then the next thing begins. What gets lost is the learning: not just "did it work?" but why it worked, what you would do differently, and what this reveals about how you make decisions. Capturing that understanding, while it is still fresh, is one of the highest-value things you can do with the back end of any significant decision, project, or experiment.

What happened: Build an accurate account of intention vs reality and the key moments in between.

Why it went the way it did: Analyse what worked, what failed, and what was in or outside your control.

What you will carry forward: Translate insight into specific changes to how you approach similar situations.

How to use this tool

Use this log as close to the conclusion of a significant decision, project, or experiment as possible - ideally within a week, while the detail is still fresh. The further you get from the event, the more memory smooths over the friction that produces the most useful learning (Schacter, 1999).

Event details Complete the header section before starting the review. Identifying the type of event helps frame which questions will be most useful. Noting who else was involved reminds you to ask how it looked to them, not just to you.

What happened Build an accurate account of what you intended and what occurred. Focus on specific moments that turned out to be significant, including ones that felt routine at the time. Accuracy here is more valuable than a coherent narrative.

Why it went the way it did Separate what was within your control from what was not. Be specific about causes rather than general about outcomes. If something went wrong, identify the decision or assumption that contributed to it. If something went well, identify what produced the result.

What you will carry forward Translate insight into specific changes, not general intentions. "I will seek an outside view before committing to a timeline" is more useful than "I will try to be less optimistic." Record carry-forward points in enough detail that they are still actionable in six months.

Patterns over time After completing several logs, review them together. The patterns across multiple events are more informative than any individual review.

EVENT Details

Event or decision *Name or title*		Type ☐ Decision ☐ Experiment ☐ Career ☐ Relationship ☐ Other	
Date completed *When did this conclude?*		How long did it take? Duration from start to finish	
Who else was involved *Family, friends or others who played a part*		Who decided? You alone, or shared with someone else?	

In one sentence - what were you trying to achieve?

What was at stake? What made this significant?

PART 1 Intention vs Reality

Before diving into analysis, establish the facts. Record what you intended to happen, and what actually happened - as objectively as possible. Avoid interpretation at this stage; that comes next.

What you intended	What actually happened
Your plan, goals, and expectations at the outset.	The outcome and the path that led to it.

KEY MOMENTS AND TURNING POINTS

When / phase	What happened	Why it mattered

PART 2 Analysis - Why Did It Go the Way It Did?

Look for causes, not just symptoms. Try to distinguish between things that went wrong because of poor planning, things that went wrong by chance, and things that were simply outside your control.

What worked well	What didn't work
What would you do the same again? What exceeded your expectations?	Where did things fall short? What caused problems or friction?

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What surprised you	What was outside your control
What was unexpected - good or bad? What did you fail to anticipate?	What factors influenced the outcome regardless of what you did?

CONTROL VS CHANCE VS CHOICE

Factor / influence	Was this in your control?	How significant was it?
	☐ Yes ☐ Partly ☐ No	
	☐ Yes ☐ Partly ☐ No	
	☐ Yes ☐ Partly ☐ No	
	☐ Yes ☐ Partly ☐ No	

PART 3 Key Learnings

Go deeper than “what happened”. Look for what this reveals about you - your assumptions, your instincts, your patterns. The most valuable learning is often not about the subject matter, but about how you think and decide.

What this revealed about you	What you now know about this type of situation
Your decision process, reactions under pressure, and what you prioritised.	What you understand about this domain, context, or challenge that you didn’t before.

What this revealed about risk and uncertainty	Assumptions that proved wrong
How accurate were your predictions? Did a risk you identified in Step 5 happen, one you had not identified, or neither?	What did you believe at the outset that turned out to be incorrect or incomplete? Check the assumptions you listed in Step 2.

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BIAS CHECK

Which of these may have influenced how you approached or interpreted this situation?

☐ **Overconfidence** - Believed I knew more than I did	☐ **Planning fallacy** - Underestimated time, cost, or difficulty
☐ **Confirmation bias** - Favoured information that confirmed my view	☐ **Sunk cost** - Continued because of what was already invested
☐ **Status quo bias** - Preferred the familiar over the better	☐ **Optimism bias** - Expected things to go better than was realistic
☐ **Loss aversion** - Gave too much weight to the risk of loss vs potential gain	☐ **Availability bias** - Was influenced by vivid or recent examples
☐ **Anchoring** - Was over-influenced by initial information or numbers	☐ **Self-serving bias** - Credited success to myself and failure to circumstances

PART 4 Forward Application

Learning without action is just reflection. Use this section to translate what you have understood into specific changes - in how you decide, how you prepare, and how you approach similar situations next time.

Do more of	Do less of	Do differently
Approaches or habits that served you well and are worth repeating.	Things that created friction, cost time, or added little value.	Specific changes to your process, assumptions, or behaviour.

SPECIFIC ACTIONS

What will you do differently next time?	By when / in what context?	Done
		☐
		☐
		☐
		☐

The core learning - in one sentence

The single most important thing you are taking away from this experience.

Which future decisions does this learning apply to?

What types of situations, choices, or contexts will this insight inform? Has this outcome closed off any options, or opened new ones?

Sources

U.S. Army. (1993). A leader's guide to after-action reviews (Training Circular TC 25-20). Headquarters, Department of the Army.

The After Action Review methodology was developed by the United States Army. The four-question structure used in this tool - what was supposed to happen, what actually happened, why the difference occurred, and what should be done differently - follows this approach.

Schacter, D. L. (1999). The seven sins of memory: Insights from psychology and cognitive neuroscience. American Psychologist, 54(3), 182-203.

The source for the point that memory smooths over the detail of past decisions.

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