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**Notes from editor (not for publication):**

Thanks, Jim. —Jeff



HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

####BEGIN HED####

1 Four simple questions could improve presidential  
2 leadership. Would Trump ask them?

####END HED####

####BEGIN SUBHED####

3 The after-action review process can turn experience into  
4 learning. Done poorly — or ignored entirely — the process  
5 leaves organizations trapped in a cycle of repeating the same  
6 mistakes.

####END SUBHED####

7 TEXT BODY:

####BEGIN TEXT####

8 THESE FOUR QUESTIONS the highest-performing  
9 organizations routinely use to improve performance: *What was*  
10 *intended? What actually occurred? Why did it happen? What will*  
11 *we do differently next time?*

12           These questions form the backbone of one of the most  
13 practical learning tools ever developed: the after-action review  
14 (AAR). On its surface, it seems almost too simple. No billion-  
15 dollar consulting contract. No 12-step leadership pyramid. No  
16 retreat center with matching fleece vests and trust falls. Just four  
17 disciplined questions.

18           And yet, done well, the AAR is remarkably effective. It  
19 turns experience into learning.

20           Done poorly — or ignored entirely — the AAR leaves  
21 organizations trapped in a cycle of repeating the same mistakes  
22 while confidently announcing that this time will somehow be  
23 different.

24           \* \* \*

25           THE AAR HAS deep historical roots. Strong leaders have  
26 always reflected on outcomes. Julius Caesar's *Commentaries on*  
27 *the Gallic War* is often cited as an early example of systematic  
28 self-review, though most modern managers are discouraged from  
29 crossing rivers and conquering provinces to improve quarterly  
30 performance.

31           The modern AAR was formalized by the United States  
32 Army in the 1970s. The Army recognized a simple truth:  
33 Experience alone does not produce learning — reflection does.  
34 So the Army embedded a structured review process into training  
35 exercises and missions.

36           The method is direct and rigorous. Soldiers and leaders  
37 gather after an event and walk through the four questions in  
38 detail. They compare intentions with outcomes, identify gaps,  
39 examine causes, and convert lessons into specific behavioral  
40 changes for the next mission.

41           But the real breakthrough is cultural. The Army insists on  
42 a condition most organizations struggle to achieve: "Leave your  
43 rank at the door."

44           The AAR is not designed to assign blame. It is designed  
45 to understand reality.

46 Without psychological safety, the process quickly  
47 collapses into defensiveness, finger-pointing, and elaborate  
48 explanations of why someone else would be responsible.

49 With honesty and discipline, the AAR becomes one of  
50 the most effective learning systems ever created. It is not used  
51 casually across every military setting. Elite units use it most  
52 effectively where performance standards are unforgiving and  
53 excuses have a very short shelf life.

54 \* \* \*

55 FROM THESE ORIGINS, the AAR has spread far beyond the  
56 military. Today, it is used in healthcare, aviation, emergency  
57 response, and disaster management.

58 Hospitals use AAR-style debriefs after critical incidents to  
59 improve patient safety and team coordination. Emergency  
60 response agencies revise communication and coordination  
61 protocols after wildfires through structured reviews that force  
62 agencies to confront what failed instead of merely restating what  
63 had been intended.

64 The evidence is clear: Organizations that conduct honest  
65 AARs improve faster than those that do not.

66 Yet adoption remains uneven because many institutions  
67 love the language of accountability far more than the practice of  
68 it.

69 They hold “reviews” that are polite, vague, and carefully  
70 engineered to avoid discomfort. Lessons are “taken under  
71 advisement,” placed into binders, uploaded into folders no one  
72 will ever open again, and then quietly buried beneath next  
73 quarter’s strategic initiative.

74 Behavior does not change. In these settings, the AAR  
75 becomes theater: a meeting that signals seriousness without  
76 requiring it.

77 Where AARs work well, the pattern is remarkably  
78 consistent. High-performing teams conduct them quickly, focus  
79 on specifics, insist on candor, and follow through on what they  
80 learn. Failure is treated not as a reputational catastrophe but as

81 information. That is difficult because failure demands something  
82 most institutions instinctively resist: honest self-examination.

83 \* \* \*

84 WHICH BRINGS US to the most uncomfortable application  
85 of all: political leadership.

86 In theory, the AAR is exactly what high-stakes democratic  
87 governance requires. In practice, modern politics is almost  
88 perfectly designed to prevent it.

89 Political systems reward message discipline over truth,  
90 loyalty over candor, and optics over reflection. Mistakes are  
91 reframed rather than examined. Outcomes are narrated rather  
92 than measured.

93 Imagine, for a moment, if major policy decisions were  
94 subjected to the same disciplined review expected in elite  
95 military units, emergency rooms, or airline safety investigations.  
96 Start with intent. Not slogans. Not applause lines. Not “many  
97 people are saying.”

98 What, specifically, was the policy intended to  
99 accomplish? On what timeline? Based on what assumptions?

100 Then examine outcomes without spin. Did the policy  
101 fully work? Did it partially work? Did it create unintended  
102 consequences? Did reality stubbornly refuse to cooperate with  
103 the talking points?

104 This is where many leaders struggle, because honesty in  
105 politics often feels like volunteering to stand in front of a firing  
106 squad armed with cable news panels and social media clips.

107 Next comes causality: What signals were missed? Which  
108 dissenting voices were ignored? Where did coordination fail?  
109 Which assumptions proved false? Effective AARs do not hide  
110 behind the all-purpose political phrase “mistakes were made,” a  
111 sentence so evasive it practically deserves its own witness  
112 protection program.

113 Finally — and most importantly — comes commitment  
114 to change. What will be done differently next time? Who is

115 accountable? How will improvement be measured? What  
116 evidence would prove that the original strategy was flawed?

117         Imagine cabinet-level AARs after major national  
118 initiatives. No cameras. No fundraising emails five minutes later.  
119 No leaks positioned as “exclusive sources familiar with the  
120 matter.” Just disciplined reflection, written findings, and  
121 measurable follow-through.

122         How differently might policies evolve regarding Iran,  
123 healthcare, tariffs, immigration, or disaster response if the  
124 objective is genuine learning rather than perpetual political  
125 positioning?

126         And perhaps most importantly: What if the criteria for  
127 evaluation included separating the common good from personal  
128 or political self-aggrandizement?

129         At its core, the AAR is not a management technique. It is  
130 a test of leadership character. It demands the willingness to face  
131 reality without distortion and to accept that meaningful  
132 improvement is usually uncomfortable.

133         The AAR works not because it is sophisticated, but  
134 because it is honest. History repeatedly shows that organizations  
135 rarely fail from a shortage of intelligence. More often, they fail  
136 because they cannot — or will not — look clearly at their own  
137 performance.

138         \* \* \*

139         SO, TO President Donald J. Trump, the challenge is  
140 simple.

141         Answer the four questions.

142         Not rhetorically. Not defensively. Honestly.

143         If you can do that, both leadership and democracy  
144 improve.

145         If you cannot, nothing changes, except the wording of  
146 your next press release or social media post.

147         And that would be the worst outcome of all.

####END TEXT####

BIO/COATTAIL:

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149 leadership consultant working in the global healthcare sector.

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