

How leaders can support high-impact Early Action Reviews

- Early Action Reviews (EARs) are one of the most powerful tools available for improving outbreak response. Guided by the 7-1-7 target, they provide a structured process for examining the timeliness of detection, notification, and early response, identifying barriers and enabling factors, and translating those insights into practical improvements.
- They are also among the hardest to do well. Surfacing difficult findings in a way that supports learning and action requires both technical rigor and careful navigation of operational, financial, reputational, political and diplomatic realities.
- This guide walks leaders through how they can support effective EARs which will help their institutions learn and improve—and maintain the integrity of the reviews when the pressure is highest. Technical guidance on conducting Early Action Reviews is available in the [7-1-7 Digital Toolkit](#) and the World Health Organization’s [Early Action Review guidance](#).

Create the conditions for honest learning

Whether an EAR produces honest, actionable findings depends as much on the process as on these signals sent by leadership before, during, and after the review. Teams will not report accurately if they fear their findings will be used punitively, shared publicly without context, or held against them in future evaluations.

During outbreaks attracting international attention, involving dangerous pathogens, or unfolding in politically sensitive contexts, response teams and their leadership can be under intense pressure when partners, donors, and media are watching. The political risk of transparency can feel greater than the operational risk of incomplete learning, unless leaders take proactive steps. Specifically, leaders should:

- Frame the EAR publicly and internally as a learning exercise, not an audit or an investigation
- Encourage and model candid and open discussion of both successes and challenges
- Focus discussions on operational, coordination, resource, and systems issues rather than individual actions
- Reinforce that identifying bottlenecks is a sign of a functioning system
- Create a clear separation between the EAR and individual performance management
- Anticipate and actively manage fears of blame or reputational damage so teams can report findings honestly and act on them
- Demonstrate that candor leads to action. Assign responsibility, resources, and timelines to address surfaced bottlenecks, and ensure report back on what changed as a result of the review.

When leaders set the expectation that EARs begin as early as possible, while the response is still ongoing, corrective actions can be implemented in real time. EARs should then be revisited and updated as new evidence emerges, including updates to performance against key 7-1-7 timeliness metrics.

Revise milestone dates as evidence evolves

[7-1-7 milestone dates](#) help understand where detection, notification and response worked well, where delays occurred, and where systems can be strengthened. As outbreak investigations progress, additional evidence may become available through case investigations, contact tracing, laboratory testing, genomic sequencing, retrospective epidemiological reviews, or reviews of health facility records that provide a more complete understanding of when detection, notification, and early response occurred. This new evidence can provide a more complete understanding of when transmission began and when key actions occurred. Milestone dates should be reviewed and updated as new information becomes available.

During high-visibility events, there can be pressure to treat milestone dates as fixed once they have been shared externally to avoid the appearance of inconsistency or error. When leaders resist this pressure and instead update the dates in response to the emerging evidence, it provides a more accurate and open assessment that can produce higher-impact insights. Updating milestone dates as evidence evolves shows that the system is learning. When leaders support this iterative and open approach to 7-1-7 assessments with emerging evidence, they reinforce this explicitly, making clear that accuracy matters more than appearances, and that revised dates reflect better information and lead to better decisions.

If milestone dates are not revised as evidence evolves, some decisions may be based on an inaccurate understanding of the outbreak, resulting in misplaced investments, unresolved system bottlenecks, recurring performance gaps during future emergencies, and reduced public trust.

Uganda's review of 7-1-7 milestone dates in the 2022-2023 Ebola outbreak strengthened its response

During the 2022-2023 Ebola outbreak, Uganda's response teams continued to review and update their 7-1-7 milestones throughout the response. They initially found that it took 15 days to detect, less than 1 day to notify, and the response target was still to be determined because they were only a few days into the response. However, during the outbreak investigation, they realized that they had missed some initial cases, including the index case. When they reapplied 7-1-7, 12 days into the response, they found that it took 46 days to detect, less than 1 to notify, and 9 days to complete the 7-1-7 early response actions.

The updated timeline helped identify important bottlenecks, including delays in providing enhanced training for healthcare workers in private health facilities. On the response side, they found they did not have fully functional isolation units, and delays in accessing funds for rapid response teams to do contact tracing. The teams were able to address the gaps right away, which contributed to bringing the outbreak under control.

Uganda applied these lessons during more recent Ebola outbreaks, including the 2025 Sudan virus disease outbreak and the 2026 Bundibugyo virus disease outbreak. In both outbreaks private health facilities were prioritized, rapid outbreak financing was more readily available, and best practices for isolation facilities were applied, demonstrating the value of using 7-1-7 as a learning tool to strengthen systems over time.

Get to the root cause of bottlenecks

Identifying the underlying causes of priority bottlenecks by examining the systems, policies, resources, coordination mechanisms, and processes that contributed to them, is critical to come up with actionable corrective actions that will lead to performance improvement. Leaders should ensure that teams have the time, facilitation support, and psychological safety to move beyond surface explanations.

During high-visibility events, leaders should resist the pressure to close out an EAR quickly and move on. A rushed root cause analysis produces corrective actions that address symptoms rather than causes and the same bottlenecks can persist in an outbreak or reappear in the next outbreak.

Communicate the results

Once an EAR is complete:

- Share findings with all team members immediately so corrective actions can begin.
- Brief senior leadership and relevant decision-makers who were not directly involved in the EAR to secure resources, remove barriers, and support longer-term actions.
- Where appropriate, share findings with partners and donors and frame results in terms of learning and improvement rather than failure.
- Be transparent about the purpose, process, and intended use of the EAR to build trust and reduce the risk that findings will be misunderstood or misused.
- Assign clear ownership for corrective actions, with a follow-up point to verify progress.
- Treat the EAR process itself as no-fault internally, naming systemic issues clearly while shielding individuals from blame, since a process seen as punitive discourages honesty in future reviews.

During high-visibility events, EAR findings will often be of interest to international partners, donors, and in some cases the public. Transparency about process and improvement intent becomes even more critical. Countries that communicate EAR findings openly, including what went wrong and how they are fixing it, build the kind of trust with partners and donors that translates into sustained support and investment.

The role of international partners

International partners play an important role in creating the conditions for impactful EARs. Partners who respond to transparent findings with support rather than criticism, who reinforce the non-punitive nature of 7-1-7, and who help countries frame bottlenecks as investment opportunities rather than failures make it easier for countries to review honestly.

EARs are country-owned. The role of partners is to strengthen that ownership.

The systems that improve fastest are the ones willing to look honestly at where they fell short. EARs make that possible but only if the conditions for honest review are actively created and protected. That is a leadership responsibility as much as a technical one.