Debriefs: An Experiential Learning Tool to Boost Team Effectiveness

A White Paper from The Group for Organizational Effectiveness (gOE), Inc.

What are debriefs?

Debriefs are a quick, yet powerful experiential learning tool for enhancing team performance. During a debrief, team members reflect upon a recent experience, discuss what went well and identify opportunities for improvement. They attempt to build a common understanding (e.g., about work challenges, team member responsibilities, how best to handle a situation) and establish agreements to ensure future success.

A debrief can be conducted after any team experience (e.g., at the conclusion of a work shift, meeting, or training event; at any point during a project; during the middle of a performance period; or after any team "action"). They can be used as a follow-up to leadership or team training, or as a stand-alone experiential learning tool [1]. They require little planning and can be conducted periodically to promote team and leader learning, help a team stay on track, and ensure it performs effectively.

All team members can participate in a debrief, which could be led by the team leader, or by a facilitator, consultant, coach, or trainer.

Do debriefs work?

Simply stated, done correctly, debriefs work. Research indicates that teams that conduct effective debriefs outperform other teams by an average of 25% [2]. For example, when U.S. Naval Officers were taught how to conduct effective debriefs, their teams performed far better than those led by other Naval Officers [3]. As debriefs cost little to conduct, they are among the most cost-effective ways of promoting on-going learning and ensuring team effectiveness.

> *Simply stated, done correctly, debriefs work...teams that debrief effectively outperform others by 25%*

Why do they work? What is the "science" behind them?

You have probably been on a team that, despite working together for a period of time, did not improve or reach its potential. You may have even had the misfortune of being on a team that performed worse over time. Simply being on a team together does not ensure that team learning will occur.

> *Debriefs work because they help teams learn from their experiences and self-correct over time*

The type of information sharing, feedback, discussion, and action planning that takes place during a debrief prepares teams to perform more effectively [4]. It enables them to form "shared mental models;" research shows that when this happens, team members know what to expect from each other and subsequently coordinate and perform more effectively [5]. During debriefs, teams often uncover and correct knowledge gaps, misunderstandings, or misconceptions that left unchecked can lead to significant problems. This process can also help team leaders sharpen their leadership capabilities.

> *In a sense, debriefs are experiential learning accelerators*

Because the vast majority of learning takes place on-the-job rather than in formal programs [6], it is extremely important to capitalize on *experiential or "in the moment" learning opportunities* whenever possible. Debriefs are particularly helpful in this area, because they provide teams with a simple, efficient way to continuously learn and improve from regular on-the-job experiences. In a sense, debriefs are experiential learning accelerators.

Who uses debriefs?

It is quite likely that you have participated in a debrief, at least an unstructured one. If you've ever been part of a group that discussed how a project was progressing, reviewed a recent customer meeting with a few of your colleagues, or "replayed" key moments from a game with members of your sports team, you participated in an informal debrief of sorts. But many teams also conduct more structured debriefs.

The armed services have conducted structured debriefs for over 30 years and typically refer to them as "after-action reviews." In fact, good military leaders and trainers are expected to conduct debriefs to ensure learning occurs. In the medical world, where teamwork breakdowns are among the most common cause of patient safety problems [7], teams are increasingly conducting debriefs after training exercises and patient cases.

It is not surprising that teams in high-risk environments use debriefs. A mistake by a medical, fire-fighting, police, drilling, or military team can have serious, even lethal consequences. They must use the most effective ways available to build high-performing teams. However, the utility of debriefs is not limited to high-risk teams; any team with members who must interact and rely on each other to accomplish their "mission" can benefit from debriefs. For example, some "lower-risk" teams that have benefitted from debriefing include:

- Management teams
- Project teams (IT, quality, change teams)
- Retail teams (restaurants, banks, hotels)
- Sales teams
- Sports teams
- Student teams
- Production/manufacturing teams
- Customer service teams
- R&D teams (new product teams)
- Consultant teams

For organizational teams, debriefs can provide a competitive advantage, for example, by improving customer satisfaction, reducing risk, or ensuring a key project is completed on time. In rapidly-paced environments, or in situations where team members change or work in different locations, periodic debriefs can help ensure that everyone remains on the "same page."

What are the most common challenges to conducting an effective debrief?

Debriefs work and are easy to implement; the key is to structure and conduct them in a way that derives the most benefit in the least amount of time.

> *...having good interpersonal skills and technical competence does not ensure that a person will lead an effective debrief*

Few team leaders (and for that matter few instructors or facilitators) have been trained to conduct team debriefs; and unfortunately, simply having good interpersonal skills and technical competence does not ensure that a person will lead an effective debrief [8]. It is important to provide leaders and facilitators with an effective debrief "process," because without some guidance or structure:

- Most leaders will gravitate towards discussing "taskwork" issues (e.g., the features of a product, equipment capabilities, or the nature of a patient's disease) to the exclusion of teamwork issues. While technical discussions are valuable, research shows that *teamwork* greatly impacts a team's effectiveness [9], so **debriefs should address teamwork and not simply taskwork**. It's important to recognize that leaders are often promoted into their positions because of their task expertise, so they may be less comfortable discussing teamwork issues than taskwork issues.

- Leaders often "tell" their teams what they believe the team has done wrong (or right), and fail to involve the team adequately in diagnosing team effectiveness and establishing team action plans. Since a leader can't see and know everything, if team members do not have the chance to reflect upon their experiences and offer their perspective, subsequent decisions may be based upon incomplete information. Moreover, when a

leader simply tells his team what to do, team members are less likely to "own" and commit to subsequent action plans [10]. So, **debriefs should actively involve team members and ensure their participation.**

- Teams can spend too much time discussing issues they do not really need to discuss. For example, we have seen teams spend 90% of an unstructured debrief debating an issue about which all team members agreed. This is frustrating for participants, and discourages future debriefs. So**, debriefs should be designed to uncover real team improvement needs as efficiently as possible.**

- Teams may engage in a discussion about what happened in the past, but not establish any agreements about what they intend to do in the future. While this type of discussion may be interesting, it is unlikely to result in sustained or improved team performance. So**, debriefs should lead to agreements about future actions,** which could include agreements to continue doing those things that are working.

What is DebriefNow and why use it?

DebriefNow (www.DebriefNow.com) is a web-based tool that enables teams to conduct efficient, effective debriefs. After a leader or facilitator quickly sets up a DebriefNow session, team members answer a targeted set of DebriefNow questions that pertain to their recent experience(s). DebriefNow instantly analyzes the team's answers and produces a customized DebriefNow Guide that provides targeted discussion points in priority order. The leader or facilitator can then use the Guide to lead a structured debrief with the team.

> **DebriefNow is a web-based tool that enables teams to conduct efficient, effective debriefs**

DebriefNow incorporates lessons from the science of team effectiveness and is designed to help teams engage in quick, useful debriefs to improve their effectiveness. A recent study shows that teams that used DebriefNow developed better teamwork than

teams who conducted unstructured debriefs [11]. DebriefNow maximizes the effectiveness of team debriefs because:

- **DebriefNow addresses teamwork and not simply taskwork.**
    o DebriefNow contains sets of targeted questions and subsequent discussion points for different types of teams and various situations
    o The targeted questions and discussion points ensure that relevant teamwork issues are identified and discussed during the debrief

- **DebriefNow actively involves team members and ensures their participation.**
    o The DebriefNow process provides all team members with the opportunity to reflect upon the team's recent experience(s)
    o Individuals' responses are anonymous, allowing team members to feel safer and more apt to provide candid input and feedback
    o Each customized DebriefNow Guide contains targeted discussion points, and explains why the team is encouraged to discuss the issues identified. Team members can see that the discussion is based directly on their input, so they feel it is a discussion worth engaging in
    o The focus of the DebriefNow Guide is on teamwork rather than personalities, and on team improvement rather than assigning blame; together this stimulates a more constructive type of conversation and greater participation

- **DebriefNow is designed to uncover real team improvement needs as efficiently as possible.**
    o The targeted DebriefNow questions are highly diagnostic, and typically take less than five minutes to answer
    o Proprietary algorithms immediately uncover inaccuracies, lack of awareness, or perceived teamwork problems
    o The DebriefNow Guide directs the discussion to where there are real needs, so a group doesn't waste time talking about "non-issues"

- o The Guide prioritizes needs based on the team's answers and presents the most critical discussion points first (in case they only have time to discuss a few key issues)

- *DebriefNow shapes discussions to lead to agreements about future actions.*
  - o The DebriefNow Guide provides targeted discussion points, including points that require the team to consider the future; this prompts them to reach agreements and establish action plans

- o Each customized DebriefNow Guide is based on the team's answers, which tends to motivate team members to take ownership of the issues and subsequent action plans

> *In a recent empirical study, teams that used DebriefNow demonstrated significantly better teamwork than teams that conducted a less structured debrief*

DebriefNow and gOE, Inc.

DebriefNow

Internal and external consultants (e.g., HR, OD, L&D, Quality, Project management) who support different types of teams will find DebriefNow to be a useful addition to their toolkit. **Managers, project leaders, and team leaders** can use DebriefNow to lead their own team through effective, structured debriefs to help ensure their success. **Trainers and learning professionals** can use DebriefNow to boost and extend their team and leadership development programs.

Individuals and organizations that purchase DebriefNow sessions are equipped to conduct structured debriefs with a wide range of teams using pre-established question sets. They are also able to assemble customized debrief sessions for specific teams by choosing from a large pool of additional questions. And, for those organizations with specialized needs, we can work with you to develop your own unique, bespoke DebriefNow content.

If you are interested in learning more about DebriefNow, visit www.debriefnow.com or contact us at DebriefNow@groupoe.com.

About gOE, Inc.

The Group for Organizational Effectiveness, **Inc**. (gOE) is the proud developer of DebriefNow. Since 1987, gOE has been providing consulting and research services to many well-known global companies, mid-sized corporations, and government organizations, including approximately 30% of the Fortune 100.

All of DebriefNow's question sets and discussion points were developed by gOE's **world-class experts in team effectiveness**. Members of our team are leaders in the science of teamwork, publishing hundreds of scientific articles and chapters. Equally important, for the last 25 years we've worked extensively with management teams, project teams, sales teams, IT teams, boards of directors, service teams, and many other work teams. We've also worked with "high-risk" teams such as medical teams, combat teams, oil rig teams, smoke jumpers, aviators, and aerospace crews. This history ensures that the content in DebriefNow is both scientifically valid and highly practical.

For more about gOE, visit www.groupoe.com.

Footnotes

1. **Tannenbaum, S.I., Beard, R.L., & Cerasoli, C.P. (2013). Conducting team debriefs that work: Lessons from research and practice. In E. Salas, S.I. Tannenbaum, D. Cohen & G. Latham (eds.) (pps. 488-519)** *Developing and Enhancing High–Performance Teams: Evidence-based Practices and Advice*. **San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.**

This book chapter examines the various ways that debriefs can be used to enhance team performance, including those conducted after work and/or training experiences. It also provides advice and tips for implementing and using debriefs effectively.

2. **Tannenbaum, S.I. & Cerasoli, C.P. (2013). Do team and individual debriefs enhance performance? A meta-analysis.** *Human Factors: The Journal of Human Factors and Ergonomics Society, 55,* **231-245.**

This meta-analysis shows that on average, teams that conduct debriefs outperform their counterparts by 25%. Meta-analysis is a statistical technique that combines the findings from all prior empirical studies. Since it combines results across many studies, meta-analytic findings are usually more trustworthy than those from a single study. This meta-analysis provides strong evidence that debriefing consistently improves team effectiveness.

3. **Smith-Jentsch, K.A., Cannon-Bowers, J.A., Tannenbaum, S.I., & Salas, E. (2008). Guided team self-correction: Impacts on team mental models, processes, and effectiveness.** *Journal of Small Group Research*, *39*, 303-327.

In this carefully-designed study, U.S. Naval Officers were randomly assigned to either a condition where they were trained how to conduct effective debriefs or to a control group where they received additional task-related preparation. The Officers then led their teams through a series of simulated combat exercises. Teams that were led and debriefed by the trained Officers demonstrated significantly better teamwork and over 40% better team performance than teams in the control group.

4. **Mesmer-Magnus, J.R. & DeChurch, L.A. (2009). Information sharing and team performance: A meta-analysis.** *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *94,* **535-546.**

This meta-analysis of over 70 empirical studies shows how information sharing is essential for team performance and cohesion. It also revealed that not all teams naturally share information adequately. For example, teams with less similar team members are less likely to share information. Debriefs provide a structured way for teams to share information constructively.

5. **DeChurch, L.A. & Mesmer-Magnus, J.R. (2010). Measuring shared team mental models: A meta-analysis.** *Group Dynamics, 14*, 1-14.

Team members are said to have a shared mental model when they possess a clear, common understanding – for example, an understanding of each others' roles, their team's mission and priorities, what to do in certain situations, the equipment or resources they use, or how work should be performed. This meta-analysis of over twenty empirical studies reveals that teams with shared mental models consistently perform better than other teams. Debriefs are effective, in part, because they help teams establish shared mental models.

6. **Tannenbaum, S.I. (1997). Enhancing continuous learning: Diagnostic findings from multiple companies.** *Human Resource Management*, *36*, 437-452.

This study, conducted at multiple organizations in the U.S. (and a follow-up study, conducted in Japan, Korea, and China) found that in organizational settings, only 7-9% of competency acquisition occurs as a result of formal training. Informal learning from experience – through trial-and-error and by interacting with and observing peers, colleagues, and leaders – was a far more prevalent source of learning than formal training.

7. **Risser, D.T., Rice, M.M., Salisbury, M.L., Simon, R., Jay, G.D., Berns, S.D., Wears, R.L., & Leape, L.L. (1999). The potential for improved teamwork to reduce medical errors in the emergency department.** *Annals of Emergency Medicine, 34*, 373-383.

This review of malpractice claims in emergency medical departments examined over 50 cases where better teamwork could have avoided or mitigated major problems, including unnecessary deaths and major impairments. Many other reports, including several by the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations, have also revealed that teamwork problems contribute to a significant portion of medical mishaps. As a result team debriefs are becoming increasingly common in medical settings.

8. **Dismukes, R.K., Jobe, K.K, & McDonnell, L.K. (2000). Facilitating LOFT debriefings: A critical analysis. In R. K. Dismukes & G. M. Smith (Eds.),** *Facilitation in aviation training and operations (pp. 13-25).* **Aldershot, UK: Ashgate.**

In this study of debriefing practices in the aviation community, the researchers found that most debrief leaders had strong interpersonal skills, were technically competent, and quite conscientious, yet they were not naturally effective at facilitating debriefs. That is why it is important to provide team leaders, trainers, and consultants with a structured process for conducting debriefs effectively.

9. **LePine, J.A., Piccolo, R.F., Jackson, C.L., Mathieu, J.E., and Saul, J.R. (2008). A meta-analysis of teamwork processes: Tests of a multidimensional model and relationships with team effectiveness criteria.** *Personnel Psychology, 61*, 273–307.

This meta-analysis of over 130 empirical studies confirms what we know from experience – teamwork matters. They found that teams that demonstrate more effective teamwork processes are more likely to believe their team can succeed, are more committed to the team, and most importantly, they are about 20 to 25% more likely to succeed. That explains why team debrief sessions must examine teamwork and not simply taskwork. And not surprisingly, teamwork is most important when team members need to rely on each for information or support to get the job done.

10. **Eddy, E.R., D'Abate, C.P., Tannenbaum, S.I., Givens-Skeaton, S., & Robinson, G. (2006). Key characteristics of effective and ineffective developmental interactions.** *Human Resource Development Quarterly, 17*, 59-84.

This is one of several studies to show that developmental interactions that enable people to self-discover their needs and identify potential solutions tend to be more effective than those where a leader, facilitator, or coach is highly directive. That is why leaders and facilitators should conduct participative debriefs rather than simply telling a team what they think the team needs to do. Naturally, leaders should contribute their expertise during a debrief, but preferably after team members have had the chance to reflect, discuss, and share their own perspectives.

11. **Eddy, E.R., Tannenbaum, S.I., & Mathieu, J.E. (2013). Helping teams help themselves: Comparing two self-guided debriefing methods***. Personnel Psychology, 66,* 975-1008.

This study compared two types of team debriefs: a basic, semi-structured debrief and a DebriefNow debrief. Business school project teams completed two debriefs while working on ten-week long projects. The teams that used DebriefNow demonstrated significantly better teamwork processes and in turn, better overall performance, as well as greater readiness and enthusiasm for future team assignments.