

Project Debriefing

PpD

(Personal and professional Development)

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Outline:

This module is intended to provide an overview and structure to conduct Project debriefings.

Objectives

- To explain what is involved in project debriefing
- Develop a clear understanding of how to facilitate a debriefing session.

Target

All project managers and team leaders.



1 Debriefing

The following notes have been compiled from original material by Scott Arbuthnot (<http://salesdoctors.com/longterm/6debrief.htm>) and added to by William Newman.

If feedback is the breakfast of champions, debriefing must be the plate it's served on. How can you inspire constant learning and improvement for your team? If experience and mistakes are the best way to learn, how can you help the people on your team learn the most from the everyday experiences of business? Debriefing is the answer.

The few moments you take to debrief an event will add three times the value in terms of staff training and development compared with the same time spent in off-the-job, classroom-style training. Researchers Wick and Leon found that 74% of staff learning and development experience happens on the job. Classroom training only accounted for 26% of learning. In hindsight, debriefing is so obvious and so valuable, it's a wonder more people don't do it.

As with many things that are good for us, we don't do them because we associate them with some sort of unpleasantness. Going to the dentist and exercising are good for us, but we associate them with fear, boredom and physical pain. The people in your organisation may not ask for feedback or volunteer to debrief an event because they associate feedback and debriefing with being blamed, reprimanded, made wrong and punished.

At work, some traditional managers think that debriefing their people is all about telling them what they did wrong and telling them to "be like me." Mental health practitioners have a saying: "All interventions should increase choice." I think this also applies to debriefing. Don't make me wrong; give me choices.

So if you want to leverage the learning value of the daily events in your organisation, your challenge is to overcome any negative associations with debriefing. You want your people to associate debriefing with being acknowledged and empowered.

To achieve this, it needs to be okay for people to make intelligent and responsible mistakes. If it's not okay to make mistakes, and mistakes are denied or covered up, your team misses out on learning. Making it safe for your team to "make mistakes and learn" means your people can let go of blaming each other for self protection and get on with improving things.

Of course, one of the most powerful ways for you to achieve this "make mistakes and learn" atmosphere is by taking a leadership role. It is important to openly discuss your own mistakes, relate them to what you learned, and tell how you improved. An excellent leadership response to a reported mistake can be, "It happens. What did you learn?"

Debriefing works best when it is not threatening or obtrusive. With practice, your debriefing can be conversational and unobtrusive. Your people will think you're just chatting and congratulating them for their own improvement ideas. In this way, you can even debrief events you didn't witness.

Without debriefing mistakes and inefficiencies that have existed in past projects will remain in future projects. It is better to recognise mistakes from a project that is finished then to make them in one that is in progress.

As a wise man once said "it is ok to make a mistake, it is totally inappropriate and unacceptable to make the same mistake twice".

2 Structure

Projects will vary in size and consequently the number of people who are involved. Regardless of the size of the project there should be a debriefing. The debriefing will have potentially three stages or levels. Firstly a debriefing that involves everyone involved in the project (organisational debriefing), secondly a debriefing at a team level (team debriefing) and thirdly debriefing at a personal level (personal debriefing).

2.1 Organisational debriefing

For very small projects this may be a very informal gathering of those involved. Despite the informality of the gathering the questions raised in section 4.1 should still be covered and the answers documented. For small projects the getting together of staff involved is all that is needed.

2.2 Team debriefing

For projects that involved a number of people from each team then a group and team meeting should be held. This allows the individual teams to look at ways of improving their service to the organisation and improving the work environment for all members of the team.

2.3 Individual debriefing

At an individual level people should be asked periodically to evaluate their involvement in projects. This should be a personal thing involving them and their team manager. It is something that can be used to monitor individual goals and progress but more importantly to get a ground level perspective of things that went well in a project and those things that need improvement.

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**“My team has created a very innovative solution,
but we’re still looking for a problem to go with it.”**



3 Conducting the debriefing

The following information provides some general guidelines for running a debriefing session. These points are relevant regardless of the size of the debriefing. The same approach can be applied to a small project involving only 3 or 4 people or a project involving multiple projects that involved the whole organisation.

1. There should be somebody who leads the discussion. This person should prepare a set of questions.
2. It is important for the facilitator to make sure there are no personal attacks on people.
3. It is useful for participants to be familiar with questions before the actual session.
4. Reserve enough time -- the debriefing should last as long as people have important things to say.
5. During the session form a circle. This helps to create open minded, face-to-face atmosphere.
6. Everybody should have a possibility to contribute to the discussion. The facilitator has to "keep an eye open" to make sure individuals are not sitting passively and not getting off the track.
7. The task of facilitator is not to present his/her own opinion but to create a possibility for all participants to contribute their ideas and feelings.
8. From time to time the facilitator should summarise the general sentiment or the main point(s) -- to clarify an issue or before moving on to another question.

4 General debriefing questions

The facilitator should informally collect information from participants prior to the debriefing. This can be used to set the scene for an organisational debriefing. The facilitator should outline what the project was about and what it achieved, in essence what happened. It is important to stress that this is one view only. This in itself may start considerable discussion on what peoples perceptions of what the project was really about.

4.1 Organisational Questions

In this stage have someone write the points down on the white board. In addition have a scribe who will copy things from the board to paper. Be very careful choosing these people as this involvement may exclude them from discussion. It shouldn't, but in practice it will.

The following questions are general and can be applied to all projects that are completed. It is important at this level to focus people's attention on the big picture. This is important for them to feel that they are involved in the big picture and not just a mouse on a tread wheel.

The facilitator should also avoid focussing on team specific issues. The exception to this is if the project debrief will not involve team debriefing due to it being a small project.

What went well?

This allows people to start off feeling acknowledged, safe and valid. It is just as important to recognise the things that have been done well as those that are weak. Deal with all the positives before moving to the things that did not go so well.



What didn't go well?

Once the "What went well?" section is dealt with you need to move onto those things that did not go as well as they could, or should have. This does not mean things were done wrong, although this may be the case, it means things that could have been done differently.

It is important in this section to avoid people attacking other individuals. Any comments should be made in a constructive and objective manner. This potentially will be the facilitators greatest challenge.

For each of the two points above ask the following questions for each.

Why did things happen?

This elicits reflection and interpretation of the experience. It is in effect looking for the contributing factor to what went or didn't go well. Again it is important to not allow things to degenerate into a blame session. The facilitator must listen and if need be reword the comment to identify the contributing factor in a none personal way.

For example someone might say the contributor to a bad design was "James gave me a pathetic brief that he came back and changed three times". A better way of putting that would be to say "The initial brief was incomplete and there were a number of what appeared ad hoc changes. This is more effective as it allows us to pick up on the ad hoc issue which may lead to another issue. Blaming people will not lead to anything constructive.

What will we do differently and better next time?

This helps them learn what improvements need to be made. It is looking for ways that things can be improved. It is important to try and get all ideas regardless of how general they may be. Even if someone suggests something that may appear very odd, dramatic or totally wild, still record it.

How can we use this?

This helps people deliberately apply their learning to their work. It may be something that can be applied at an organisational level or something that would work at a team or individual level. It is about recognising leverage and suggesting at a general level where that can be applied.

The best way to present this is to use the whiteboard. Have four columns as shown below.

Item What did/didn't go well	Contributor Why did this happen?	Improvement What will be different next time?	Leverage How can we use this?

4.2 Team questioning

The team debriefing should progress along the same lines as the organisational questions. The difference is that at a team level the emphasis will be on the team and its operation. In saying this it is very likely that issues raised at the organisational level debriefing will be raised again. This is not a problem, but the facilitator must be aware of not getting bogged down going over issues already covered.

By following the same initial questioning it gives people a chance to open up. People often feel more comfortable in a team meeting than at an organisational meeting and as such may openly disagree with what came out at the organisational level. It is also at this level that criticism of other teams will surface. For the facilitator it is essential that the cause and not the people be looked at. Do not let the discussion degenerate into a slaying match or a "pick on" session. It is vital that it remains positive but where necessary constructively critical. Issues cannot be skirted around or ignored. All issues must come to the surface if the debriefing is to have value.

Once the general questions as outlined in the organisational debriefing are dealt with for the team then team specific questions should be asked. These will vary from project to project although there will generally be a core of common questions. The facilitator of each team will be responsible for the questions in this section. The following questions are an example of those that could be asked within the production team.

Production

1. How big was your team at the beginning and how big was it at the end.
2. What were the main reasons for the change in size.
3. According to your recent experience, what do you think is the optimal size of the team and number of participating teams for this kind of project?
4. Were you happy with the composition of the team?
5. Were some people more involved than others? Why?
6. How often did the team meet? Why did/didn't they meet?
7. How did your team manage to accomplish the tasks during this project? Was the way you used to accomplish your tasks effective enough? Could something have been done better?
8. Could the pressure of time be removed or diminished by organising the work differently? (both by organisers and by yourself)

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"In this office, everyone is treated with respect and dignity. Thank God we can still be rude to computers!"



4.3 Individual questions

The individual debriefing is designed to allow individuals to provide very personal feedback. It concentrates on their perception of the overall project and their own feelings and performance during the project. This information can be a very powerful ongoing tool in staff self appraisal. Questions include:

1. What were your expectations in the beginning? Which of them were fulfilled?
2. Try to describe the emotions you had during the project: what were the most surprising, boring, disappointing, funny, etc. things?
3. Have you changed any of your opinions due to this project?
4. Did you learn something interesting during this project?
5. How useful did you find information you got?
6. Did you have enough time to accomplish the tasks of this project?
7. How useful did you find WWW? How many times and why did you look at it?
8. Did you have any help from the manual?
9. Is there some other ways to reach the same goals more effectively?
10. Where your instructions always clear?

The individual debriefing questions should be given to the person to fill out in their own time prior to any organisational or team debriefing. The team leader should then go through the questions with them after the organisational and team debriefing if they have occurred.

5 Summary

You know your debriefing has worked when your people have a clear plan for improvement. If they plan to do exactly the same thing again, they haven't learned anything. This can be pretty tough when things are going well, but this is when you are most in danger of becoming complacent.

Debriefing is what makes the difference for excellent teams who just keep getting better.