

Team Development: The Power of Debriefing

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Think about one of the best teams that you've been on. It could be a team at work or a team from outside of the workplace. Was that team great on day one? We've asked this question to thousands of people over the years and very, very few teams are great when they are first formed. The best teams become great because they learn from their experiences and they make adjustments. They self-correct. While a few teams and team leaders seem to do this naturally, most need a little structure and guidance. Fortunately, there is a relatively simple, inexpensive technique, called a team debrief, that when applied properly, has been shown to consistently enhance team effectiveness. This article highlights what you need to know to conduct successful team debriefs.

Not all teams are created equally, but virtually any team can benefit from a team debrief. The technique was originally developed for military use in the '70s¹, but since then, it has

been shown to be useful in a broad range of settings. The original debriefs were fairly elaborate, thorough affairs (imagine debriefing a recent battle), but most current debriefs, particularly those in corporate settings, are fairly efficient, often being conducted in 15 to 60 minutes.

Well-conducted debriefs work, and there is strong meta-analytic evidence to support that contention. A meta-analysis is a statistical combination of all prior empirical studies on a topic. We generally have more confidence in the findings from a meta-analysis than from any one study. Tannenbaum and Cerasoli conducted a meta-analysis of 46 prior research samples that examined debriefing.²

On average, teams that conduct debriefs outperform those that do not by over 20 percent. That's a remarkable bump for a relatively simple intervention. During a debrief, a team simply reflects upon and discusses recent experiences, identifying



what went well and where improvements may be possible. They reach agreements on specific adaptations they intend to make and then they get back to work. In the course of doing this, they often fill in team members' knowledge gaps ("I didn't know that happened"); surface where they might need additional support (which perhaps their leader can request); and develop shared mental models about priorities, roles, or what to do in certain situations ("if-then") in the future.

Yet, this quick and easy technique often goes unused. So, the purpose of this article is to encourage you to conduct team debriefs and to provide you with 10 scientific-based guidelines, or best practices, on how to use them effectively. We also provide a short outline for leading a quick team debrief. In other words, we share why you should conduct debriefs and provide ample information so you can implement them properly.

We partition what's needed into three main sections: before, during, and after a team debrief, offering 10 best practices from the research on debriefing.³ You'll find these listed in Table 1. Along the way, we'll try to be clear about the "must dos" and "nice to haves." In all, we hope to provide you with the information needed to conduct effective debriefs and make simple team debriefs a standard leadership practice in your organization.

Before a Debrief

Prior to running a team debrief, there are a few conditions that will greatly increase the likelihood of success.

Best Practice 1: Allocate time to debrief. What is the number one reason why debriefing fails to boost team effectiveness? It is because the leader simply didn't allocate time to conduct it. Even if the leader is well-intended, we've noticed that if time isn't scheduled, it won't happen spontaneously. Admittedly, at first it requires a little discipline to commit to doing periodic debriefs and putting them on the calendar. But ideally, a team debrief shouldn't be a major event, just a normal part of being on a team, like establishing an agenda for a meeting or a charter for a project. Leaders who have seen the benefit of periodically "investing" 30 minutes in team debriefs build them into their standard leadership practices.

Best Practice 2: Educate team leaders on how and why to lead team debriefs. Team leaders are far more likely to conduct team debriefs, and to do so effectively, if they understand their role in leading them, including some relatively straightforward dos and do nots that make a big difference (we highlight five of those below). It is also helpful for them to know that a debrief doesn't take long and that research shows that they improve team performance—so debriefing isn't some "feel good" HR program, but rather just a solid leadership practice.

With expanding spans of control, most leaders can't see everything that is going on in their team. If team members don't have a vehicle for sharing what they are seeing, the leader and other team members are operating partially in the dark. Periodic debriefs help turn on the light. We'd encourage you to provide a 30-minute educational module on how to conduct a team debrief as part of your management development and project management training efforts. Much of the content you'll need to assemble that module can be extracted from this article.

Best Practice 3: Teach leaders and team members about what really influences team effectiveness—the "science" of teamwork. There is an increasingly clear body of research on what really influences team effectiveness. For example, simply "hanging out" together, while perhaps fun, will not address team problems with role ambiguity, competing priorities, or a failure to fill in for one another when needed. We've noticed that when the leader has a clearer understanding about what drives effective teamwork, such as appropriate communications, backup behavior, role clarity, and shared mental models, they tend to lead more constructive debrief conversations.

While team training is not a requirement to conduct an effective debrief, think of it as a booster shot. If you have the chance to educate your leaders and team members about teamwork, you'll see benefits both during your debriefs and in general.⁴

Best Practice 4: Ensure that team members feel comfortable actively participating in a debrief. Another condition that sets the stage for successful debriefs is having a psychologically safe environment. Psychological safety is the shared belief among team members that it is safe to take interpersonal risks and speak up, even if the idea may be unpopular.⁵ It is the belief that you can be yourself in front of your team. Recently, Google conducted a study to find out why some of their teams were more effective than others. After examining all sorts of hypotheses (including the “hanging out” together hypothesis), they concluded that the single most important factor for a successful Google team was psychological safety.

Table 1 Evidenced-based Best Practices for Debriefing

Before a Debrief

- Allocate time to debrief.
- Educate team leaders on how and why to lead team debriefs.
- Teach leaders and team members about what really influences team effectiveness—the “science” of teamwork.
- Ensure team members feel comfortable actively participating in a debrief (“psychological safety”).

During a Debrief

- Avoid five common debrief pitfalls.
 - a. Too much focus on “task work.”
 - b. Telling, not discussing.
 - c. Improper or inadequate focus.
 - d. Good look back, but no definitive look forward.
 - e. Too evaluative or threatening.
- Try to conduct the debrief close in time to the “action,” if possible.
- Record conclusions and agreements reached to be able to “close the loop” after the debrief.
- If appropriate, consider trying technology to assist with your debriefs.

After a Debrief

- Boost accountability and willingness to participate in future debriefs by following up on agreements and communicating progress.
- Conduct periodic debriefs that are “fit for purpose.”

So, psychological safety is desirable in any team, but it is a particularly important element for effective debriefs. Why? Because at the heart of any successful debrief are team members sharing their perceptions, including acknowledging when they didn't know something, didn't do something as effectively as they'd like, or didn't like the way something transpired. People are only willing to do that when they believe there is adequate psychological safety.⁶

A leader's behaviors go a long way towards creating psychological safety. Framing errors as learning opportunities, rather than punishable failures, is one such behavior. Being clear about what is negotiable (open to team input) and what is non-negotiable (cannot be changed) also helps, because it allows the leader to constructively redirect a fruitless conversation (e.g., discussing an unfixable bug in a computer application) towards one that is within the team's control (e.g., how to work around the problem). But perhaps the number one leader behavior for boosting psychological safety is when leaders admit their own mistakes or faults. When we taught military leaders to acknowledge their own limitations, we observed a marked increase in team members who did the same. Establishing psychological safety makes employees more open to having a constructive discussion because they are less afraid of feeling blamed or criticized.

When teammates feel “enough” psychological safety, they can use debriefs as an opportunity to provide feedback to one another. It allows them to share their ideas on how to solve problems without others judging them. But the stage must be set before the debrief.

During a Debrief

When these pre-conditions are met, the foundation exists for a solid debrief. So, what needs to happen during the debrief to maximize its effectiveness? We've observed many debrief sessions and examined the research on debriefing. Unfortunately, simply having good interpersonal skills and technical competence doesn't ensure that a person will lead an effective debrief.⁷ The way the debrief is structured and facilitated determines its success. The following best practices can help.

Best Practice 5: Avoid five common debrief pitfalls. There are a few common pitfalls that can derail an otherwise effective debrief.⁸ So, during a debrief, it is imperative to avoid the five common pitfalls, noted below.

5a) Too much focus on “task work.” When left on their own, with no guidance, almost all team debriefs gravitate towards a discussion of “task work.” Physicians talk about disease symptoms, military leaders focus on weapon system capabilities, and programmers talk about problems with the code. They don't naturally bring up teamwork issues, which may be creating some of the teamwork problems. 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 than taskwork issues.

One simple way to combat this is by providing the team leader with a checklist of teamwork themes they can cover

during a team debrief. An example of a simple framework for conducting a quick debrief is shown in Table 2.

5b) Telling, not discussing. We've seen this pitfall too many times. A leader begins the session by telling his team what he believes the team has done effectively and the mistakes the team made prior to soliciting the team's perceptions. He doesn't engage the team in diagnosing team effectiveness and developing action plans. When a leader simply tells his or her team their conclusions and what "needs to be done," team members are less likely to "own" and commit to those action plans—they are also less likely to share any perceptions that differ from what the leader said.

Research has shown that learners who are guided toward self-discovery have better developmental experiences than those who are simply given answers.⁹ Ironically, the greater the expertise of the person leading the debrief, the more prone they may be to "talking at" the team. If you are facilitating a debrief, begin by asking questions, not giving answers. If you discover you have a different point of view, weigh in after the team has first had the chance to share their perspective.

5c) Improper or inadequate focus. We have seen teams spend 90 percent of an unstructured debrief talking about unimportant, "safe," or un-actionable topics. Then, in the last few minutes, the important issues start to surface and the team says something like, "we don't have time to discuss that today, maybe next time." Participating in this type of debrief can be very frustrating, which discourages team members from wanting to debrief in the future. Be sure that your debrief has "enough" structure and if the team is starting to spend too much time on something trivial or "non-negotiable," help them move forward by asking a question about a meaningful team issue.

5d) Good look back, but no definitive look forward. Some teams engage in an excellent discussion about the past, reflecting on a recent experience. But the debrief didn't help them adapt, because they never transitioned from looking backward to looking forward. While discussing past events can be interesting, at some point it is important to call the question: "should we be doing anything different going forward?" If so, let's be clear about what, who, when, and how. If not, that's okay, and it's probably time to explore a different issue.

5e) Too evaluative or threatening. Some leaders inadvertently make their debriefing sessions feel more like a performance review (or court hearing) than a chance to get smarter and make quick, informal adjustments. If I perceive a debrief as a time when I'll be judged and evaluated, I'm more likely to be defensive, make excuses, and explain away problems (or avoid talking about them). I'm also less likely to share my perceptions and acknowledge concerns. Research has shown that perceived purpose (judgmental versus developmental) has a significant impact on the accuracy and acceptance of feedback.¹⁰

So be sure the tone of your debriefs are primarily developmental in intent (let's learn some stuff and make a few adjustments) rather than judgmental or evaluative (let's find out who is to blame for our problems).

Best Practice 6: Try to conduct the debrief close in time to the "action," if possible. Debriefs ask participants to recall and discuss their team's experiences. Naturally, the more time that transpires, the less people can actually recall about the experience. They may remember how they felt, or their "interpretation" of what happened, but they are less likely to recall exactly what happened as time goes by. A debrief relies on accurate observations and feedback, so as a general rule of thumb, it is best not to wait too long to debrief a particular event, decision, or situation. Ideally, for most management and project teams, we'd encourage you to set up a regularly scheduled opportunity to debrief (perhaps twice per month). If there's nothing to discuss you can cancel it, but you'll likely find that there is often something worth debriefing.

Best Practice 7: Record conclusions and agreements reached to be able to "close the loop" after the debrief. When the team reaches conclusions and agrees to the adjustments they want to make, those should be captured during the debrief and circulated to the team shortly thereafter. This serves several purposes. First, it gives everyone on the team one last chance to confirm that they concur or to note where they had a different understanding about the agreements. In that sense, it eliminates potential ambiguity. Second, it increases a sense of accountability among team members, as we're more likely to do something if we know it will be tracked. Third, it provides a tangible check point that the team can use to close the loop during their next debrief. For example, at the end of a debrief a team might agree that whoever presents to the team will state whether they are simply updating the team, seeking their input, or looking for the team to make a decision. During the next debrief session, they can ask, "have we been doing a good job of stating our expectations?" If yes, great; we should feel good about the progress. If not, do we want to keep that agreement and if so, how can we be better about it going forward?

Best Practice 8: If appropriate, consider trying technology to assist with your debriefs. To be clear, you can conduct a debrief without any technology. But there have been some interesting developments that you should be aware of that might enhance your debriefs in certain circumstances.

When used correctly, multimedia aids can provide a meaningful improvement on debrief effectiveness. For example, one web-based tool that has been used at NASA, with medical teams, and in other corporate settings is called DebriefNow. (In full disclosure, this is a tool offered by one author's company.) DebriefNow was designed to provide structure and guidance for a team leader or facilitator, helping them avoid a few of the common pitfalls (e.g., ensuring the team spends its time on higher priority teamwork issues). Team members anonymously answer a few questions about the team's recent experiences, and based on the team's responses, the tool produces a customized discussion guide with prioritized questions for guiding the debrief. Research has shown that a structured approach like this is more effective than simply asking "what went well, what did not go well, and what should we do differently?"¹¹

Teams do not need DebriefNow to conduct a debrief, but

it can assist team leaders and other facilitators who would benefit from a little guidance and structure.

Another tool, called the Synchronous Mobile Audio-visual Recording Technology Cart (SMART-Cart), was designed to facilitate video-assisted debriefing in a faster and more reliable way than traditional delivery.¹²

When debriefing occurs after a team training session (another useful time for conducting a debrief), participants can watch their performance as a means of promoting reflection and discussion. The SMART-Cart stores recorded video of the trained simulation in a central server for remote viewing and reduces setup and take-down times. This specific tool was developed for use as part of healthcare simulations, but it can be useful in other contexts; for instance, a facilitator of a corporate team can show video footage of their team training to highlight specific teamwork processes so that participants can see, reflect upon, and discuss how they can improve on-the-job. In general, video can be a useful tool for team debriefs when the team activity in question (e.g., a training simulation or perhaps a team meeting), is amenable to video-recording, and the team is willing to allocate the time to take a closer look at the way they handled the activity.

As technology advances, we envision more strategies to assist debriefing. For example, there have been discussions of mobile applications being developed to help teams complete debriefing remotely. This can benefit the debriefing process by providing participants with privacy to answer questions on their own and then displaying results for the team to review as a whole.

After a Debrief

An effective debrief can surface where improvements are needed and the plans to adopt. What happens after the debrief will also influence its efficacy.

Best Practice 9: Boost accountability and willingness to participate in future debriefs by following up on agreements and communicating progress. Let's assume that team members were willing to open up about their concerns and that the team reached a few tangible agreements during a debrief. But then nothing happens, or at least nothing happened that was visible to the team

members. You can predict what will happen next. Team members lose interest in participating in future debriefs. So, a key post-debrief step is to close the loop, checking to see if the team (or individuals) are living up to the agreements, and if so, assessing if they are working as intended. This increases the likelihood that changes occur and it reinforces that the debrief is a worthwhile forum for speaking up. Sometimes useful feedback about progress (or lack thereof) can be provided from the leader to

Table 2
Quick Team Debrief Outline

1. Set the stage (30 to 60 seconds)

- Explain why you are conducting a debrief and what the team will be discussing.
- “This is a quick opportunity to learn from our experience. Let’s look at how we handled this [situation, project, event, meeting, shift]: what we did well or could improve.”
- “Let’s consider how we worked as a team, in addition to any technical issues”
- If there are any boundaries or “non-negotiables,” let the team know what’s off limits.

Basic assumption: “We’re all competent and well intentioned people who want to do our best. This is about getting better at what we do.”

2. Ask the team for their observations (5-20 minutes)

- What **happened**?
- What did we do **well**? What **challenges** did we face?
- What should we do differently or focus on **next time**?
- What could **help us** be more effective? Anything we need?

3. Add your observations/recommendations and confirm understanding (5-10 minutes)

- Reinforce their observations, or if you noticed something different, share your view of what happened or needs to happen in the future.
- Be sure any feedback you provide is clear, actionable, and focuses on the work, not personal traits.

4. Summarize any agreed-upon actions or focus for the future (5 minutes)

- Be clear about who will do what, when...and how this will help the team.
- Specify when and how you will follow up to assess progress (e.g., next debrief?).

Tip: Ask the team for their perceptions first. Then if possible, acknowledge one thing that **you** could have done differently or that you will focus on in the future. This will make it easier for team members to voice their own observations or concerns.

Tip: If the team doesn’t discuss teamwork, ask “**how well did we work together as a team?**” Perhaps ask one or two specific questions such as:

HOW WELL DID WE...
 + Communicate/share info
 + Monitor/provide backup
 + Coordinate with “outsiders”
 + Speak up/challenge one another
 + Ask for/offer help
 + Handle conflict
 + Share/allocate resources
 + Prepare/plan

HOW CLEAR WERE OUR...
 + Roles/assignments
 + Goals/priorities

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a specific team member or even peer to peer. Other times, it is best done in a team setting. Regardless, the key is to ensure that follow-up occurs and that the team sees change and progress as a result of their participation.

Best Practice 10: Conduct periodic debriefs that are “fit for purpose.” Conducting a one-off debrief is okay, but the most value comes from conducting a series of them, allowing the team to make small, continual adjustments so reflection, discussion, and adaptation become part of the team’s natural rhythm. Unfortunately, the most common debrief we’ve seen in corporate settings is a one-off and it occurs at the end of a project. Sometimes it is referred to as a post-mortem. This type of debrief can help surface a few lessons learned for the future, but frankly if that is the only debrief you conduct during the project, you’ve missed out on the opportunity to make mid-course corrections.

There is no magical, perfect frequency with which to conduct debriefs. In general, the more complex and dynamic the work the team is performing, the greater the recommended debrief frequency. Naturally, shorter debriefs can be conducted more frequently than elaborate ones. For example, it can be beneficial to quickly huddle up after any team presentation or at the end of any team meeting and ask, what did we do well, what could we do differently next time? That only takes five minutes.

For senior leadership teams (and other decision-making teams), we highly recommend conducting the occasional “decision” debrief. Take a recent decision and discuss: a) what was the decision (e.g., what led up to it), b) how did we make the decision (e.g., who was involved, decision governance, information considered, speed of decision making, the way it was communicated), c) what did we do well, d) what could we have done differently in hindsight, and e) what does this mean for our future decisions (e.g., lessons learned and agreements).

There are also times that lend themselves to slightly more thorough debriefs. For example, the end of a project phase, or after a “misstep” has occurred, are often great times for a

slightly deeper, 60-minute debrief discussion. One final tip: if the only times you conduct debriefs are after something went wrong, people will start associating debriefs with blaming sessions, like being called to the principal’s office as a child. You’ll want to avoid that.

Conclusion

Structured team debriefs are a simple, easy-to-use, but underutilized technique to improve teamwork behaviors. Your organization is likely using teams on a regular basis. And it is no fun being on a struggling team. By following the 10 science-based debriefing best practices noted above, you can increase team effectiveness throughout your organization from senior leadership teams to project teams to change management to sales to manufacturing teams. We strongly encourage you to give it a try. ■■

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