

# Using Debriefs – A Simple, Powerful Experiential Learning Tool

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## Presented by:

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During his 25 years as a scientist-practitioner, Dr. Tannenbaum has served as a tenured business school professor and currently leads The Group for Organizational Effectiveness, a boutique consulting firm that has provided OD services and research support to over 400 organizations, including one-third of the Fortune 100 and 75 Global 1000 companies. He has over 65 publications, 100+ presentations, 5 research/teaching awards, and his research has been cited over 6000 times. He was named a Fellow of the Society of Industrial/Organizational Psychology (SIOP) and of the Association for Psychological Science (APS), has reviewed for over 20 professional journals, and served as principal investigator on many funded research projects. He recently co-edited the book, *Developing and Enhancing Teamwork in Organizations: Evidence-based Best Practices and Guidelines*, published by Jossey-Bass and is currently providing NASA with team research and advice to help them prepare for their Mission to Mars.

## Session Description:

Debriefs are a powerful yet underutilized tool for accelerating experiential or “in-the-moment” learning. During a debrief, team members reflect upon a recent experience, discuss what went well, and identify opportunities for improvement. Teams build a common understanding (e.g., about challenges and responsibilities) and establish agreements to ensure future success. Debriefs can be used as a follow-up to leadership/team training, or as a stand-alone experiential learning tool (e.g., at the conclusion of a work shift, mid-project). A recent meta-analysis published by the presenter (Tannenbaum & Cerasoli, 2013) revealed effective debriefs boost team performance an average of 25%. Debriefs sound simple enough, but unfortunately, most teams don’t conduct debriefs, and even when they do, they fall prey to common pitfalls. This interactive session covers the research behind debriefs, common mistakes and ways to overcome them, and how best to design and lead debriefs to optimize learning and team self-correction.

## Session Objectives

- Understand the science behind debriefs, including their efficacy and the underlying psychology that enables them to work
- Know the types of teams that can benefit from debriefs and when debriefs can be conducted
- Be able to recognize and avoid common pitfalls when designing and conducting debriefs

**Main Objective: Encourage you to conduct debriefs more frequently and effectively!**



## **Session Outline**

### **I. What is a Debrief?**

- Description and types of debriefs

### **II. Why Debrief?**

- Prevalence of learning from experience
- Teamwork is critical
- Evidence it works (the science behind it)

### **III. Common Pitfalls to Effective Debriefing**

- Five of the most prevalent problems

### **IV. How to make Debriefs Work**

- Discipline
- Structure
- Preparation

### **V. Facilitating a Debrief**

- Overcoming “critical junctures” when facilitating a debrief
- Debriefing tips for team leaders and facilitators

### **VI. Q & A**

## Tips for Debrief Leaders – Conducting Effective Team Debriefs

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1. A debrief is simply a structured discussion or review of an event or action. Research has shown that they can **greatly enhance teamwork and effectiveness**. Naturally, you can't debrief every event, but try to get in the habit of periodically conducting debriefs, even quick ones, with your team. In the long run, conducting periodic debriefs can improve efficiency and save you and your team time.
2. Conduct the debrief as **close in time to the experience** as possible – the longer the delay, the more likely it is that team members will forget what really happened. Alternatively, you can conduct a periodic “check-in” debrief with your team.
3. Describe the debrief as an **opportunity for the team to learn** from their experience, and not simply as a critique. Mention that all team members may have valuable insights about the team, not just you, and ask everyone to speak up. Involve the full team when possible. Research shows that the more team members who actively participate, the greater the benefits from the debrief.
4. Seek the team's input **before voicing your own** opinion. Otherwise, the team may simply defer to you and a potential concern, misunderstanding, or opportunity could be missed. Hearing the team's perspective will also often provide a good opportunity for you to share your perceptions and expertise.
5. When you ask the team for their observations about what happened, what went well, and what could have been done differently, **be sure to pause**. Don't be afraid of silence. It may take them a few seconds to organize their thoughts and speak up. If you are quiet for a little while, someone will typically get things started. Sometimes you can ask how this situation was similar to or different from prior ones to jump start the discussion.
6. A team debrief should discuss **teamwork** (e.g., communications, seeking/offering help, role clarity, preparation, information sharing) and not simply **taskwork** (e.g., the technical aspects of the work). It is often easier to focus on taskwork, but teamwork is equally important to team success. If the team is only discussing taskwork issues, ask the team to explicitly consider how they worked as a team.
7. Don't shoot the messenger. If someone voices a concern or admits they could have done something better, **do not chastise them**. That will only prevent the person (and even other team members) from voicing a potential concern or admitting a misunderstanding in the future. You can't see everything, so you need the team to be alert for and willing to discuss concerns, problems, needs and successes.
8. Look for an opportunity to **admit something** you could have done differently or that you will personally focus on in the future. When you show you are open to improving it makes it easier for your team members to do so as well. This is a simple but powerful leadership action that has many benefits.
9. Use the debrief to reflect **back** on what happened **and then look forward** to how things should be done in the future. At the conclusion of the debrief, ensure the team is clear about what they agreed to keep doing, start doing, avoid doing, or pay careful attention to in the future.

From [www.debriefnow.com](http://www.debriefnow.com) and Scott Tannenbaum's presentation, “Using Debriefs – A Simple, Powerful Experiential Learning Tool,” OD Network Conference, 2013.

## Leading a 10-Minute Debrief

### 1. Set the stage

- “This is a quick opportunity for learning and continuous improvement. Let’s take a look at how we handled this [situation, project, event, meeting, shift, activity]
- “Let’s consider how we worked as a team, in addition to any technical issues”

**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 (7 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?

**Tip:** 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 pick one of the following teamwork topics and ask a question about it:

- |                                        |                                  |
|----------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| -- Communications (e.g., info sharing) | -- Asking for/offering help      |
| -- Monitoring and backup               | -- Awareness of goals/priorities |
| -- Role clarity                        | -- Preparation/planning          |
| -- Speaking up/challenging             | -- Managing conflict             |
| -- Coordinating with “outsiders”       | -- Sharing/allocating resources  |

### 3. Add your observations/recommendation and confirm understanding (2 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 the person

### 4. Summarize any agreed upon actions or focus for the future (1 minute)

- Be clear about who will do what, when...and how this will help the team be successful

From [www.debriefnow.com](http://www.debriefnow.com) and Scott Tannenbaum’s presentation, “Using Debriefs – A Simple, Powerful Experiential Learning Tool,” OD Network Conference, 2013.

## Debrief Facilitation Mindset

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- ☐ **Participants first, you second.** When it is time for reflection and critique, let the team go first. Avoid telling too much or too soon...either tends to result in less learning.
- ☐ **Look back, then forward.** Reflection and critique (back), then specific action plans/agreement (forward).
- ☐ **Ask and pause.** Let silence be your friend.
- ☐ **What's right, not who is right.** Avoid finger pointing or chastising.
- ☐ **Be the navigator, not the driver...**unless they aren't driving properly!
- ☐ **Reinforce and thank.** Reinforce what they did well. Thank people when they acknowledge a mistake.

From [www.debriefnow.com](http://www.debriefnow.com) and Scott Tannenbaum's presentation, *"Using Debriefs – A Simple, Powerful Experiential Learning Tool,"* OD Network Conference, 2013.

## Critical Junctures When Facilitating a Team Debrief

Critical Juncture	Problem	Ideas
1. <b>Leader knows best.</b> The team leader starts to tell the group everything the group did wrong	The team doesn't learn as much or take ownership of what they've learned. It closes down their input, so anything the leader hasn't seen won't surface or be discussed.	<b>Pre</b> – do homework to determine if the leader is prone to this. If so, pre-coach. <b>During</b> – clearly explain at start of debrief that all team members will have the chance to weigh in <b>During</b> –At the first pause state, “let’s see what the group thinks about their experience...” <b>After</b> – Meet with the leader and describe expectations for next time (and how it will help their next debrief)
2. <b>Team member domination.</b> A team member is dominating the debrief discussion.	Doesn't allow some team members the chance to participate. Less learning occurs and the team is less likely to commit to action.  This is more likely to occur in some settings, organizations, and cultures than others, but all it takes is one person to create it.	<b>Pre</b> – in the invitation note, specify expectations. <b>During</b> -- At the start of the debrief, establish the ground rule that you will be seeking input from everyone. If appropriate, ask the leader to reinforce. <b>During</b> – start by asking for <i>one</i> observation from someone. Then, ask for an observation from someone else. <b>After</b> – ask the leader to coach the team member afterwards
3. <b>For a limited time only.</b> You only have 10 minutes to conduct the debrief	You can't conduct a thorough debrief, so key issues may not be addressed. Not ideal, but sometimes you only have 10 minutes!	<b>Pre</b> – try to schedule more time, if possible <b>During</b> – at start, announce how much time is available and that you'll move them crisply through the debrief. <b>During</b> – ask them to focus on most important issues (“if you could change one thing, what would it be and why?”). Alternatively, prime the debrief by asking them to focus on a key teamwork area (e.g., communications) where you think there is room for improvement. <b>During</b> – don't let them spin. Capture open items on a flip chart and offer to share a summary with them afterwards. <b>After</b> – allocate more time next time
4. <b>Task not team.</b> The team discusses technical issues and avoids discussing teamwork issues	Very common in all fields because people gravitate towards topics with which they are more comfortable.  Unfortunately, many problems are teamwork related and if not discussed, no improvement is likely.	<b>Pre</b> – Let participants know that they'll be discussing <i>how</i> they work together as a team. <b>During</b> – At the start of the debrief, remind them. <b>During</b> – Ask specific questions about “how they worked together” (e.g., communications, back up, seeking help, etc.) <b>Post</b> – Ask the team leader to follow up on teamwork related agreements

Critical Juncture	Problem	Ideas
5. <b>Hear the pin drop.</b> People don't speak up – you ask a question and they don't answer	May result in the facilitator talking too much, hurting the learning experience.  Can be uncomfortable for the facilitator	<b>Before</b> – Clarify participants' expectations, so they know they will be asked to share observations first. <b>Before</b> – Generate a good set of debrief questions. Test them with a trusted colleague to ensure they are engaging, relevant, and understandable. <b>During</b> – Pause. A key facilitator skill is being comfortable with periods of silence. Most groups will start talking if they feel uncomfortable before you do. <b>During</b> – Ask the group what they did well or even just ask them to describe what happened recently. A safe question or two can get the group started and allow you to follow up with more challenging questions. <b>During</b> – Ask the most confident person in the room (or someone you know) to share their observations first. <b>After</b> – If this is a recurring problem, ask someone who will be participating in the next session to be prepared to jump-start the discussion.
6. <b>What do YOU think?</b> They ask you what you think before they share their perspective	Can result in the facilitator doing most of the talking, with the team members not taking ownership of the lessons  It can result in a team vs. facilitator debate, where the facilitator says what they think, and the team responds with excuses or denials	<b>Before</b> – Clarify participant expectations, so they know they will be asked to share their observations first. <b>During</b> – Tell the group that, "I'll share my thoughts after you have had the chance to share your observations." Then ask a good open-ended question again, for example, "so, what happened during the xyz event?" <b>After</b> – If this is a recurring pattern, modify your introductory comments or your opening questions as needed.
7. <b>Know and tell.</b> This self-imposed critical juncture is when the facilitator relies too much on telling the team what they need to do to be effective.	Will preclude self-discovery on the part of the team  Can result the team tuning out, getting defensive, and not taking ownership of potential lessons	<b>Before</b> – Get prepared and have the right mindset. <b>During</b> – Be self-aware. If you find that you are doing most of the talking you may be falling prey to this critical juncture. If so, stop and ask the group a question. <b>After</b> – Ask a trusted team member how the session went and if they had ample opportunity to contribute.

## Annotated Bibliography

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. The book it appears in contains evidence-based guidelines with chapters written by leading team researchers and practitioners.

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. (in Press). Helping teams help themselves: Comparing two self-guided debriefing methods. *Personnel Psychology*.

This study compared two types of team debriefs: a basic, semi-structured debrief and a debrief using a technology that produces a guided, customized discussion guide ([www.debriefnow.com](http://www.debriefnow.com)). 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.

12. Tannenbaum, S.I., Beard, R.L., McNall, L.A., & Salas, E. (2010). Informal learning and development in organizations. In S.W.J. Kozlowski & E. Salas (eds.), (pp. 303-332) *Learning, Training, and Development in Organizations*. New York: Routledge.

This chapter examines informal, intentional learning in organizations. As most learning takes place outside of formal training, it is helpful to understand how informal learning works so we can create conditions to accelerate learning from experience.

For a white paper on Debriefing and a new debriefing technology, visit [www.DebriefNow.com](http://www.DebriefNow.com)