

# Post event debriefings for emergency events:

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Why are we not doing them and how can we start?



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## Post event debriefings for emergency events:

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### INTRODUCTION

Post-event debriefings in emergency response can be defined as a 'discussion of actions and thought processes after an event to promote reflective learning and improve operational performance'. Post-event debriefings have been described as a 'facilitated or guided reflection in the cycle of experiential learning'. We should define post-event debriefings as a facilitated discussion of an event focused on learning and performance improvement.

Essential elements of post-event debriefings include active self-learning, a primary intent for improvement, reflection on specific events (not general performance) and the inclusion of input from multiple team members. Post-event debriefings differ from meetings aimed at assisting staff in managing emotionally taxing incidents; a process known as 'critical incident stress management'.

Post-event debriefings are a foundational behaviour of high performing teams. A recent analysis found that organizations can improve individual and team performance by up to 25% by conducting effective debriefings. In simulation-based studies, debriefing has been associated with enhancements in team performance, and improvements in both technical and behavioural skills. Post-event debriefings have been shown to increase overall performance, reduce the frequency of equipment-related problems, and improve communication and teamwork.

If post-event debriefing is so beneficial, why aren't they conducted more frequently? In this paper we will provide practical advice on how to conduct post-event debriefings in following an emergency event. We also explore the perceived barriers to conducting post-event debriefings and offer strategies for overcoming them. Finally, we consider opportunities to foster a culture change within Emergency Management which integrates debriefing as standard daily work. This paper provides the guidance necessary to facilitate more frequent post-event debriefings, and thereby enhance safety and improve our response phase.

### CONDUCTING A POST-EVENT DEBRIEFING

Any guidance on post-event debriefing must include not only the 'how' of debriefing, but also the 'who,' 'what,' 'when' and 'where'. These foundational pillars are all essential to effective post-event debriefing and addressing each is necessary to foster the development of a safety culture which allows debriefing to become a standard practice.

## *WHO*

To improve team performance, all members of the team should participate in the post-event debriefing. Common team members include team leaders, safety officer, general members, duty officer and respective managers. Each of these team members possesses a unique perspective, and each perspective is important to understanding the individual and team strengths and weaknesses. Input from all team members during the debriefing enhances the ability of the team to improve future performance.

One individual on the team should be designated as the leader, or facilitator, of the debriefing. This individual both guides and participates in the discussion. As implied by the term 'facilitator', the debriefing leader should facilitate, not dominate, the conversation. This is accomplished primarily by asking open ended questions and practicing self-restraint in answering the questions. Any member of the team can serve as the facilitator.

Establishing a unit policy outlining which team member will act as the facilitator is helpful to clarify roles and avoid confusion; one common practice is to assign the team leader or safety officer to be the facilitator. Pre-assigning a specific team member to be the facilitator also helps to ensure that debriefings occur consistently.

## *WHAT*

The volunteering environment offers frequent opportunities where post-event debriefings can be conducted. These include on site (immediately following a task); community events; near misses and adverse events; challenging public interactions. These events challenge the cognitive, technical and behavioural skills of the response team involved and – regardless of the quality of the team's performance – deserve mindful, team-based review accomplished through post-event debriefings. Learning how to replicate successful team performance is just as important as understanding how to avoid repeating suboptimal performance.

## *WHEN*

Finding the optimal time to reconvene a team involved in an event is one of the most challenging aspects of post-event debrief? The team present at an event will have competing demands on their time as they continue fulfilling their responsibilities after the event. Geographic separation of team members after the event may add an additional barrier to post-event debriefing. Debriefings can be conducted either immediately after the event ('hot' debriefing), or at a time remote from the event ('cold' debriefing); benefits and drawbacks for both types of debriefing exist. Of these two options, most experts recommend the hot debriefing for the following reasons:

- All members of the team are already physically present.
- The risk of recall bias is minimized.
- It creates the potential to quickly address issues identified during the debriefing.

Immediate post-event debriefings may uncover significant system vulnerabilities that demand greater exploration and require engagement of unit leadership. In these situations, the initial hot debriefing should focus on team performance, while the subsequent cold debriefing can focus on system function and process improvement. The cold debriefing may be part of a root cause analysis, with a goal to identify and eliminate latent safety risks.

### *WHERE*

Choosing the location of a post-event debriefing is guided by a careful balance between convenience and confidentiality. Debriefings of events can be conducted in either onsite or off-site areas. The utility of debriefing in an onsite area lies in the fact that the members of the team involved in the event are already physically gathered in that location. However, this advantage is outweighed by several problematic issues.

These are dynamic environments where other activities can easily distract team members, making it difficult to achieve an effective debriefing. In addition, the proximity to other persons can also result in frequent interruptions of the debriefing. Another major limitation to debriefing in an onsite area is the inability to guarantee the confidentiality of the discussion. Based on these issues, we recommend that debriefings occur in an offsite area, such as a conference room or break room, which separates the debriefing event from the task site, and ensures the confidentiality of the discussion.

### *HOW*

Post-event debriefings are most effective when structured and facilitated. Figure 1 provides an example of a post-event debriefing structure and conversational prompts to aid in effective facilitation. This structure is based on 'Gather, Analyse, summarize' approach to debriefing including 10 Key Behavioural Skills. As noted in Figure 1, the facilitator begins with an opening statement and establishment of a shared mental model of what happened during the event (Gather), and then examines team performance (Analyse). During the analysis phase, actual team performance is compared with ideal team performance using the 'plus-delta' technique, which focuses on what went well (plus), and what did not go well (delta). The debriefing ends with a summarisation of what will be done differently in the future, and identification of issues that require further follow-up (Summarise). By asking open-ended questions, and limiting statements of his/her own opinions, the facilitator guides

but avoids dominating the discussion. If the team agrees that a certain aspect of performance went well the circumstances that enabled a high level of performance should be explored. Similarly, when suboptimal performance is identified an examination of the underlying causes should take place. Keeping track of the 'pluses' and the 'deltas', and the strategies that sustain and improve them, is common practice in military post-event debriefings.

To optimize the debriefing experience, those being debriefed must feel empowered to speak frankly and offer their unfiltered observations, opinions and suggestions. Such an atmosphere of psychological safety, where team members feel secure in critically analysing their own performance, is best achieved when the debriefing proceeds in a non-punitive fashion, and all members of the team understand that safety and performance are collaborative, rather than an individual undertaking. As such, it is the responsibility of the team to support the performance of the individual using skills such as situational awareness and cross monitoring. Through continually reframing the discussion of suboptimal performance and errors in the context of team responsibility, the facilitator can help the team members understand their interdependence and help achieve superior team performance. To foster psychological safety, debriefing practices should conform to the response environment of the emergency management system in which they take place. Additional measures, such as having team members sign a form acknowledging the protected status of the conversation under quality improvement, can also be employed. Maintaining protection of team debriefing is fundamental to ensure all team members feel comfortable speaking candidly. Risk management can also provide guidance on the management of written records from post-event debriefings. As a rule, post-event debriefings note, or forms are should be placed with the official record of the event and are subject to the standard records management principles.

A key aspect of an effective debriefing is keeping the conversation brief. A skilled facilitator does this by focusing on a few critical performance issues, keeping the team on task, and avoiding tangential conversations. Focusing on high-value issues such as adherence to guidelines, technical, equipment or procedural issues, and 2 to 3 behavioural skills, as outlined.

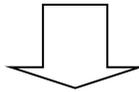
Figure 1 helps ensure the debriefing proceeds in an organized manner. Prolonged discussions of systems issues without an immediate solution should be avoided, it is often counterproductive and can lead to frustration among those being debriefed. Instead, such issues should be acknowledged, recorded, and scheduled for discussion later during a cold debriefing with unit leadership and administrative personnel who are able to effect the

necessary change. Dutifully ensuring that these issues are then appropriately followed up, and the results communicated to the team, are critical components of an effective post-event debriefing.

**What went well, and what did not ('plus/delta')**

"Okay team let's talk about our performance. What went well, and what didn't go so well?"

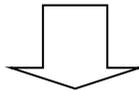
- Did the team follow established guidelines and protocols? If not, why?
- Where there any technical, equipment, or procedural issues? If so, what?
- Discuss 2 to 3 key behavioural skills relevant to the situation. How was team performance in these areas?



**What will the team do differently next time?**

"How can we do it better next time?"

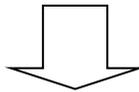
- Discuss changes in team performance that will be implemented in the future, based on discussion above.
- Identify the individual(s) responsible to follow up on issues discussed.



**Action items to follow up?**

"What issues, if any, should be deferred for a more in-depth discussion at a later time?"

- Record issues to be followed up later



**Conclusion**

"Thank you for taking part in this debrief"

**KEY BEHAVIOURAL SKILLS**

Knowledge of your environment

Anticipation and planning

Attention allocation

Use of available information

Use of available resources

Requesting assistance when required

Professional behaviour

Leadership

Communication

Delegation of workload

Figure 1

## *DEVELOPING A CULTURE THAT FOSTERS DEBRIEFING*

Emergency response activities are not the only industry in which the risk to human life is high. Commercial aviation, spaceflight, mass transportation, nuclear power and the military are all endeavours where overt or latent human and system weaknesses can lead to loss of life. What separates these other industries from emergency management is a safety culture that is less tolerant of conditions that place human lives at risk. When human and system weaknesses become manifest in other industries, the process for analysis often includes both an immediate debriefing focused on identifying issues that require prompt attention and remediation, followed by a subsequent more comprehensive review that involves experts both internal and external to the organization. Regardless of when the debriefing occurs, it is invariably focused on the facts of what happened during the event, rather than the feelings of the individuals involved in the event. Should it become apparent that individuals have experienced psychological trauma resulting from the event, critical incident stress management can be conducted.

In other high-risk operating environments, debriefing is not restricted to only near miss and adverse events; rather, it is integral to daily activities and part of standard work and should involve:

- Explicit permission and active encouragement of debriefing during an event.
- Staff training and simulation-based practice in debriefing.
- Procedural guides and policies on debriefing approved by risk management.
- Regular evaluation and quality assurance of debriefing activities.
- Private space in which debriefings can be conducted confidentially.
- A system to follow-up on issues identified during debriefings, and communication of these activities to staff.

These resources and activities will allow motivated teams to overcome any real and imagined barriers to debriefing.

## *PERCEIVED BARRIERS TO DEBRIEFING, AND POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS*

There are many perceived barriers to post-event debriefing the three most commonly reported perceived barriers to be:

1. Insufficient time to conduct debriefings,
2. Lack of qualified/trained facilitators and
3. Lack of an appropriate setting in which to conduct a confidential debriefing.

These perceived barriers in addition to the threat of litigation is also a potential barrier to frank and open post-event debriefing. Developing policies and procedures to address these potential barriers is critical in establishing a culture that fosters debriefing, and the creation of an environment where debriefing can be conducted regularly and effectively. Some suggested solutions to these perceived barriers are provided in Table 1.

***Perceived barriers to post-event debriefing, and suggested solutions***  
***Perceived barriers Suggested solutions:***

Insufficient time Limit debriefings to  $\leq 10$  min.

- Use a structured approach to keep the conversation on track (Figure 1).
- Table systems issues not immediately solvable for a later discussion with unit leadership, where a solution and action plan can be developed.

Lack of skilled facilitators Seek out individuals who have training in post-event debriefing (for example, simulation educators).

- Conduct training in debriefing for facilitators.
- Practice debriefing skills during regular simulation-based training sessions.
- Develop a policy on debriefing that outlines the roles, responsibilities and provides tools for facilitators.

Lack of an appropriate setting Identify a room as the 'debriefing room'.

- Ensure the room is available 24/7.
- Ensure debriefing conversation held in that room are kept confidential.

Threat of litigation

- Involve risk management to ensure concerns regarding confidentiality and discoverability are adequately addressed.
- Develop a policy for conducting debriefings as part of protected quality improvement efforts.
- Develop a procedure for disclosing medical errors identified through debriefing.
- Follow risk management guidance regarding the handling of written records from debriefings

## *CONCLUSION*

Despite the proven benefits of post-event debriefings, the frequency with which they are used in is extremely low. A careful examination of the barriers in conducting debriefings indicates that while real, none are insurmountable. By employing specific strategies to overcome these barriers, human and system vulnerabilities can be identified, and plans for their remediation developed. Establishing a safety culture that encourages and facilitates effective post-event debriefings enhances safety and improves outcomes, benefitting the community, the members, their families and the organisation.