

POST-INCIDENT SUPERVISOR OR SENIOR OFFICER LED DEBRIEFINGS

THE LEADER'S ROLE

The leader or facilitator is the most important part of a well-run debriefing. If you're doing a post-incident debrief immediately after an incident, the on scene patrol supervisor or platoon commander should probably guide the discussion. However, in the absence of a supervisor the senior uniformed member of the service on the scene can and should act as the facilitator. Note that if you're conducting a more formal debrief, perhaps due to the size or complexity of the incident (also called an after-action review), then it might be prudent to have someone who has more experience and was not personally involved in the incident lead the discussion (e.g. duty captain or precinct commander etc.).

FOUNDATION OF AN EFFECTIVE DEBRIEFING

For an informal post-incident supervisor or senior officer led debriefing to be effective, individual egos and personal feelings must be controlled to allow for constructive feedback, as part of the overall professional development process for every team member. All participants, especially the leader(s), must be comfortable talking about things they can and should improve upon. Human error is a fact of life. We can always perform better. There is no process or event, where the human element is involved, that is free of errors. It is not professional to just continue making such errors; it's better to talk about how we can improve as a team. Each participant must be ready to take ownership of their own actions and be willing to constructively talk about others' actions in a respectful way. All participants must be ready to provide constructive criticism and be willing to accept it in return. Everyone must participate in the debriefing with honesty and candor. The focus should always be on team performance, not an individual. Be ready to openly praise and constructively criticize (further levels of criticism should be done in private setting so as to not fault a single individual, as necessary) others while dissecting the incident.

Supervisors must be knowledgeable of the policies, procedures, and tactics governing the response to critical incidents and be able to challenge their subordinates with probing questions and thought provoking critiques. A professional debriefing should address the following questions and more:

- *What occurred?* Assess whether all objectives were met (tasks, performance, individual and team, supervisor and subordinate, etc.).
- *How or why did it happen?* Identify information and thoughts that led to critical decision points during the incident.
- *What can we do different or better next time?* Identify how we can/will prevent the same errors from happening or repeat or improve upon the positive actions taken.

FRAMEWORK OF A DEBRIEFING

The facilitator's skill in planning the agenda, creating the appropriate group discussion environment, effectively encouraging participation, and efficiently leading the group to its objectives are essential to the success of the debrief process. Good facilitators begin by clearly setting the expectations for the team's collective participation. They create and maintain a safe, open, and supportive environment for all team members, while simultaneously guiding the discussion to the extent necessary to achieve the debrief objectives. The ability to draw out quiet/reserved team members is a vital link in achieving team growth and unit cohesiveness.

The following is a sample framework to follow when preparing to conduct a debriefing:

- Identify a suitable time and place to conduct the debriefing that is away from public view and earshot. If unable to conduct the debriefing soon after the incident, consider using time during an upcoming unit training session.
- Ensure all body-worn cameras are deactivated/not recording.
- Ask the primary officer for a basic description of the incident, why they made the decisions they did, and how they feel the incident was handled in general terms.
- Frequently pivot your attention to the other team members present and

ask a set of similar questions to ensure they are engaged in the debriefing and know that they are expected to participate.

- If an officer is reluctant to participate, use simple group discussion techniques to engage them in the debriefing process (e.g. ask them to take on the role of a patrol supervisor, duty captain, ESU member, HNT negotiator, TARU technician, or other role during the debriefing and participate from that other perspective).
- Affirm or refute the statements made by the officer without interrupting or speaking over them.

Conclude the debriefing with a concise review of the key takeaway points, both positive and negative, from the incident and reiterate

- Why this process is important to our collective professional development.
- Address recurring deficiencies with the Training Sergeant or through documentation in *CRAFT*, as appropriate.

BEST PRACTICES FOR LEADERS

Debriefing discussions can be an effective way for team members to engage with core concepts, apply them, and enhance their problem-solving skills. It is good technique for promoting teamwork, eliciting higher order thinking, and is especially applicable when a subject is complex or open-ended. Communication skills develop as team members express themselves, state their ideas in a clear manner, and listen to the views of others, especially from differing points of view. Team members should be encouraged to generate their own ideas, contributing explicitly to their own and others' learning. A debriefing discussion may draw out multiple explanations and perspectives, enabling officers to ask questions they may not have asked if they were not collaborating in this fashion, thereby deepening their understanding of the topic. Discussion-based learning enables team member involvement through facilitator-directed questions and team participation. This requires that team members each contribute and learn from each other in an environment that is professionally directed by well-prepared facilitators. Consider these best practices for conducting debriefings:

- Plan for the debriefing – Facilitators often assume that leading a debriefing discussion only requires showing up. Such a view minimizes the power of preparation. Consider the following questions in your planning:
 - What are the learning outcomes?
 - What questions will be used to open, transition, and close the discussion?
 - How will I effectively manage the limited amount of time we have together?
 - What preparation do the participants need prior to the debriefing, if any?
 - How can I assess the different perspectives held before beginning the discussion?
 - Are there specific individuals or topics I should include or not include?
 - Are these ideas captured in a Department policy, procedure, or training memorandum?

- Create a participatory environment – Discussion-based learning requires team member participation, both by contributing comments and by listening to others. Find ways to involve everyone in the discussion by fostering a safe learning environment and encouraging accountability.
- Ask effective questions – An effective question encourages team members to engage in self-thinking and self-discovery. Consider questions that require not only knowledge but application and synthesis. Be thoughtful in preparing questions and encourage team members to ask their own, as appropriate. Limit the use of questions that can be answered with a simple yes or no response.
- Deepen the discussion – Allow team members time to think. Once you have asked an effective question, wait for a response. Do not be so anxious that you call upon someone too early or just answer your own question.
- Listen – Do not be so anxious to move forward that you forget to listen and learn with your team members. Practice restating comments. React based upon what you hear.
- Ask deepening questions – Do not settle for cursory responses. Use follow-up questions that deepen the discussion and set expectations:

“Why do you feel that way?” or “How did you reach that conclusion?”
Expand questions to the rest of class: “How would you respond to that opinion?” or “What else should we consider?”

- Make connections – Help the team make important connections to previous discussions or to ideas within the discussion itself. And while you may articulate these directly, it is often more effective do this through questions: “How does this relate to what s/he said earlier?” or “How is this any different than last time?”
- Reflection and synthesis – Many discussion-based strategies encourage divergent discussion before convergence occurs. Some approaches specifically advocate cognitive dissonance, leaving team members unsettled on conclusions. Regardless, it is important to allow reflection and synthesis. This might occur at the time of the debriefing itself or through further consideration and reflective discussions amongst team members over time.

DEBRIEFING THEMES

Facilitators should ensure that all relevant topics are covered, integrating instructional points as needed into the team’s discussion. It’s imperative that positive aspects of the team’s performance are reinforced and that all participants depart the debriefing with practical directions for the future. The following are suggested themes to include in the debriefing:

- Did the officer properly identify all potential resources available at the scene and gather all possible intelligence about the subject/incident prior to engaging with the subject or moving forward with the incident, to include information from the Communications Division, mobile digital devices or bystanders?
 - Feedback should emphasize that resources and intelligence coupled with officer and public safety considerations will directly inform the response to incidents.
- Did the officer appropriately develop and effectively implement a coordinated tactical plan leveraging all the resources and intelligence obtained and that considered factors such as establishing and maintaining firearms control, mitigating crossfire and confrontation

situations, delineating contact and cover roles, utilizing time/distance/cover, identifying all entry and egress points, and other scene management techniques?

- Feedback should emphasize that coordinated tactical plans should be developed and implemented at the scene of all critical incidents, even when there does not seem to be a need for one initially (these incidents are dynamic, evolve rapidly, and there may not be an opportunity later to do this effectively). Reiterate to the officers – tactics first and safety always.
- Did the officer deploy and utilize all of the necessary equipment, to include less lethal devices, protective devices, etc.?
- Did the officer effectively employ a wide range of de-escalation techniques?
 - Feedback should emphasize all of the different facets of de-escalation: communicative, emotional (UMOS and subject), and tactical/physical scene management.
- Did the officer effectively employ a wide range of deceleration techniques?
 - Feedback should emphasize the positive power of the pause. A momentary tactical pause or deceleration in general, when appropriate, allows more time to collect information and for critical decision making processes, leading to better outcomes.
- Did the officer effectively engage the subject using crisis or conflict communication techniques?
 - Feedback should emphasize avoiding communication loops and triggers while leveraging the intelligence gained to initiate communication with the subject by name, if known.
- Did the officer correctly identify and implement the proper Department procedure for the given situation, to include a request for required support units and supervisors?
 - Feedback should emphasize how most critical incidents are dynamic and may change mid-assignment which could require a change in our overall response strategy as informed by policy.

KEY MESSAGE / TAKE AWAY POINTS

The informal post-incident supervisor-led debriefing is an invaluable opportunity to learn from each other and improve our overall performance. Critiquing a critical incident provides us with an opportunity to review the effectiveness of our actions and procedures during an actual incident. The ultimate objectives should always be ensuring the safety of our team members and improving the overall quality of our police services delivered to the community. This review can be invaluable in improving an individual's, a team's, and the Department's performance during future incidents. Information obtained from such a critique may then be used to inform unit training and officer safety lessons.

