

# DEBRIEFING: SOME KEY ISSUES

Ken Williams, Ph.D.

## What is debriefing?

Debriefing is telling our story, complete with experiences and feelings, from our point of view. It is a verbal processing of past events. Debriefing includes both the facts and emotional responses, and invites feedback. Debriefing is an opportunity to share in depth recent experiences with someone who is willing to listen and care, without judgment or criticism.

1. What would you add to this description?
2. In what situations is debriefing necessary and helpful . . .
  - a. in your mission?
  - b. in your particular ministry?

## Who is the client?

This is the first issue to decide. Is the debriefing for the organization or for the person being debriefed? A common mistake in debriefing is to try to make both the organization and the person clients without realizing it. But this requires having two agenda that are sometimes incompatible. If both are needed, it's often better to have two separate times for debriefing, one for the organization and one for the person. In this paper, formal debriefing is when the organization is primarily the client, and informal debriefing is when the person is the client.

In formal debriefing the person should know at the beginning that the organization is the client. It should be clear that any information giving during the interview may be communicated within the organization, subject to the

guidelines for confidentiality. In informal debriefing, the person should know that what he or she shares is confidential, subject to the guidelines for confidentiality.

## Who is in control?

1. Formal debriefing. In formal debriefing, the debriefer normally takes more control. The debriefer and the person may decide together what are the important issues. However, we will usually have the final authority. It may help to have a list of issues to discuss, then go over the list at the beginning of the session and work out the agenda together. However, the agenda should be tentative, because crucial issues may come up that weren't anticipated.

2. Informal Debriefing. In informal debriefing, we want less control. In informal debriefing it is their time, to talk about what they want to share. They are the customer! They decide what is important. We may still need to help him or her talk about a tentative agenda of issues at the beginning of the session.

## Maintaining focus (Formal Debriefing)

Focus is a critical issue in formal debriefing. Time is often short, and it is easy to get off on tangents. A key skill is helping the person to maintain focus on the most important issues they want to talk about.

Part of our task is to keep the focus on what is important. It's very easy to drift into unimportant and irrelevant areas, especially if we ask specific questions.

1. How do we decide what is important.  
a. Their bubbles! Verbal and non-verbal bubbles are the most powerful clues. See the handout “Drawing People Out” for more ideas on responding to bubbles.

b. Information from other sources—about them, their work, their situation, their communication, etc.

c. Our own knowledge, training, and experiences in similar situations.

2. How do we maintain focus?

a. If we believe they are talking about what’s important to them, keep quiet, and respond in ways that invite them to continue.

b. Keep bubbles in our memory bank, to refer to later if appropriate.

c. Point out recurring themes, and invite them to talk about them in more depth.

d. Invite them to share more at a later time, if they seem to be running out of steam.

e. Ask broad questions on what we believe are important issues if we’re convinced they are avoiding these issues and would like to talk about them but are fearful, reluctant.

f. Confront any tendency to avoid issues we know must be discussed.

## **Using Questions Well**

New debriefers often struggle with asking

questions well. Questions are certainly very important, but they are risky!

One problem with questions is they are too easy to ask. They are often the easiest thing to do when debriefing—even easier than doing nothing for many of us! Silence may be harder than questions!

Another problem is that questions usually take control of the direction. A question is a demand for an answer, leaving the other person with little choice. The more narrow the question the higher the degree of demand and the greater control it has.

Yes, it’s easy to ask questions, but it’s not easy to ask effective questions! The first issue in effectiveness is our motives!

1. Why ask questions?

a. To show interest.

b. To invite the person to talk more.

c. To give permission to share on a deeper level.

d. To get information.

e. To lead the person in a particular direction.

f. To take control of the conversation.

g. To satisfy our curiosity.

Let’s be aware of why we’re asking! Remember, a question is usually a demand for an answer!

2. When should we ask questions?

## Debriefing: Some Key Issues

- a. The person seems confused.
- b. You are confused and need clarification.
- c. Gentle confrontation seems appropriate.
- d. When person really seems stuck.
- e. When a recurring theme comes back, but the person isn't aware of it.

### Responding to Strong Feelings

What are your attitudes to those who are very angry, upset, discouraged, resentful, afraid, etc? Do you have a need to fix people who are struggling with strong emotions?

1. Do.
  - a. Try to communicate that you are comfortable with silence when the person can't or won't talk but is feeling deeply.
  - b. Communicate empathy.
  - c. Be aware of your body language.
  - d. Try to put your understanding responses into their perception. E.g., "You really see that time on the field as destructive to your family." "From your perspective, the

Director was really unfair to you."

2. Don't.
  - a. Get upset with the person.
  - b. Take up the person's offense.
  - c. Become judgmental.
  - d. Try to fix it.
  - e. Retreat, withdraw.
  - f. Show shock.

### Some Practical Issues to Consider

1. Timing. How soon after an experience?
2. Place. Setting. Setup of chairs. Privacy.
3. Handling Interruptions.
4. Amount of time. One session or more?
5. Debrief over the phone?
6. How many debriefers?
7. How many debriefees?