

DEBRIEFING: CONFIDENTIALITY AND RESPONDING TO SERIOUS PROBLEMS

by Kenneth Williams, Ph.D.

Note: Mission leaders are encouraged to examine organizational policies and procedures regarding confidentiality in light of these suggested guidelines, to determine whether modifications need to be made. These guidelines may differ, depending on whether the debrief is formal or informal.

Everything shared in debriefing is kept confidential, i.e., no one will be told anything, with the following exceptions:

1. You have an agreement prior to the debriefing that you will write a report, share with a leader, or give the information to someone else. This agreement is best put in writing. If a report is written, the person should get a copy. No one outside those mentioned in the agreement should be told anything without permission from the person debriefed.
2. The person asks you to share something specific or general with someone else. It is best to get this in writing, to avoid misunderstandings later. Have the person write out specifically what you may divulge, and with whom.
3. The person gives you permission to share something. This may be at your request for permission to share, without pressure or threat. In this case, it is imperative to get it in writing, with the same specific instructions as in #1.
4. The person shares something which by law you are required to divulge, e.g., suicide threat, child abuse, danger to someone else or to himself. It is best to tell the person you must and will divulge this information to the relevant civil authorities, and [normally] to the appropriate mission leadership. In rare cases it may be better not to tell the person.
5. In your judgment, what the person has shared is so serious that your conscience dictates that someone else must know the information. This might include sexual or other kinds of immorality, a falling away from the faith, a move into heresy or a cult, substance abuse or addiction. In this case, do everything you can to persuade the person to go voluntarily to whoever needs to know before doing it yourself, and only as a last resort should you go yourself. But if the person agrees to go, be sure he or she actually does, and in fact acknowledges the whole truth. It's often best to offer to go with him/her.

Guidelines When Serious Problems Are Noted or Suspected

Note: Mission leaders are encouraged to examine organizational policies and procedures in light of these suggested guidelines, to determine whether modifications need to be made. These guidelines may differ, depending on whether the debrief is formal or informal.

1. Keep listening. Try to draw out as much information as possible, without making judgments (at this stage), expressing alarm, getting upset, giving advice, etc.
2. After you have the general picture, ask questions to get as specific information as possible, e.g. “who, what, when, where, how, why?” “Who have you shared this with?” “How is this affecting you, your family, your ministry, etc.?” “What do you plan to do about it?”
3. As appropriate, communicate empathy, understanding, compassion, reassurance and encouragement.
4. Try to determine how urgent and serious the issue is. Is there imminent danger to the person, his or her family, other missionaries or nationals, the reputation of the mission, his or her work, etc.?
5. Try to discover what the trends have been. Has it been getting more and more serious? In what time frame? You might ask the person to draw a graph.
6. Seek to discover how able the person is to resolve or otherwise deal with the problem. Is there an ability and willingness to do whatever may be required?
7. Make a tentative decision on what must be done. Try to do this in conversation with the person. Explore options on what to do. Consider consequences of not dealing with the problem. Try to agree on a plan of action.
8. If needed and appropriate, get counsel from someone whose judgment, expertise and experience you trust. Try to get the person’s permission to seek counsel, but you may have to get it without permission if the situation is sufficiently serious.
9. Decide who else needs to know about it. Talk this with the person, and discuss who is to talk about it, when, how and where. Discuss just what must be divulged, and what can be kept confidential.
10. Do whatever must be done, considering the seriousness and urgency of the situation. Your response needs to be in line with the gravity of the situation. Be careful not to overreact to minor issue, nor under react to critical issues.