

DEBRIEF

/ Capturing insights from field missions and assignments /

WHAT IS A DEBRIEF?

The Debrief is an interview method for efficiently capturing key lessons from staff returning from field missions or at the end of an assignment. Currently used in UNICEF's Office of Emergency Programmes (EMOPS), the Debrief is a voluntary exercise in which the interviewee is given an opportunity to reflect on their experiences during the mission/assignment, and share their thoughts on the work done and the challenges and opportunities that arose. It is a confidential process that allows people to share their views without repercussions.

REQUIREMENTS:

- Interviewer (with excellent communication skills)
- Set of 4-6 relevant guiding questions
- 60 minutes



WHEN AND WHY TO USE

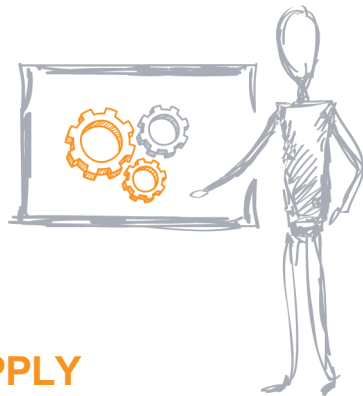
The Debrief is a useful complement to formal written mission reports, such as the End of Assignment report. The one-to-one interview process used in the Debrief encourages reflection, and can often draw out relevant impressions and learnings that would not otherwise find their way into a written report.

Conducting a Debrief involves first developing a standard set of questions concerning the key issues of a mission or an assignment. The questions are designed with a view to helping staff share their insights concerning the big picture. For example, in a Debrief of a staff member returning from an emergency mission, the questions could address how effective the crisis support was, in the opinion of the staff member; what challenges were encountered, and how they were met; and how the emergency programme work could be improved on.

During a Debrief interview, it is important to accompany the questions with time for open reflection, to allow the staff member to consider their experience and freely share anything which seems important to them.

A series of Debriefs can be done when a number of staff members return from mission at around the same time. Debriefs can also be done on a rolling basis, as staff return at different times and become available to participate. Analyses and lessons from multiple Debriefs can be summarized in a single document. A cross-section of responses from several Debriefs, all pointing to a similar problem or opportunity, can then provide a basis for changing programming approaches and improving results.

Alternatively, significant learnings from individual Debriefs can be shared with key managers on an ongoing basis. This approach has been used in UNICEF's Office of Emergency Programmes with senior management staff who are leaving emergency duty stations.



HOW TO APPLY

Prepare in advance

1. Define a clear purpose for the Debrief(s): Methodically think through how the learnings from a Debrief will be used, and obtain the needed management buy-in on the potential value of the process and the lessons it can provide. The clearly defined purpose for the Debrief should then be shared with potential interviewees, so that the use and potential value of their reflections will be clear to them.

2. Plan to conduct the Debrief ideally within one month of the staff member's return from a mission or the end of the assignment. If you are in the same physical location as the staff member, use an in-person interview to conduct the Debrief; otherwise, use a telephone/Skype interview.

3. Make an appointment with the staff member. Since the Debrief (as currently used in UNICEF) is voluntary rather than required, some staff may at first need convincing in order to get them to participate. **The best way to do this is to give a simple, clear explanation of the process and the unique value their participation would bring:**

▲ **Process:** The Debrief is a one-hour interview where the staff member is given space to reflect on their trip and provide their views on the mission. A few simple questions from the interviewer help to inspire the reflection process.

▲ **Confidentiality:** The interview is conducted 'one-to-one', with only the staff member and interviewer present. Knowledge captured and shared from the Debrief will be devoid of any identifying information.

▲ **Value:** Share the clearly defined purpose of the Debrief. The staff member, having been on the ground participating in the emergency response, is now in a position to offer direct impressions about what worked well and what didn't. The interview process often prompts insights that otherwise would not make it into formal written reports. Once the staff member's responses are captured, an analysis of the findings will be shared as lessons for immediate improvement. The analysis may also translate into learning for future emergency situations.

4. Prepare 4-6 questions. Questions for the Debrief should encourage contemplation and conversation:

- ▲ Depending on personality, some colleagues will prefer to have space to reflect, without questions or prompting, on challenges and opportunities of the mission/assignment. Give the staff member the choice either to proceed directly with structured questions, or to begin with open reflection.
- ▲ Choose open-ended questions to allow for more discussion and exploration.
- ▲ Your first question or two should be general, in order to help set the staff member at ease. The rest of the questions can aim at gathering specifics concerning the mission, such as clarity of staff roles on the ground, interactions among staff from various sectors and offices, challenges observed, or expert opinions where applicable.
- ▲ Plan to ask for examples to illustrate a point, where possible. It is often in the details that solutions can be found.

5. Arrange for a private room for the interview, whether it is in-person or via telephone/Skype.

When you are ready to start

6. Welcome the staff member and ensure that they understand, and are comfortable with, the process.

7. Proceed with the questions. Give the person being interviewed some time for reflection. Let the conversation flow naturally. When appropriate, ask for relevant examples. Take notes: Your notes will be the basis for your analysis and any lessons shared. (It is not recommended to record a Debrief: the knowledge that an interview is being recorded often has a negative effect on the staff member's willingness to openly share impressions and learnings).

8. At the conclusion of the interview, thank the staff member and let them know about how the Debrief will be processed and shared.

9. After the interview, do an analysis of the interview results, highlighting any particularly relevant findings, and removing any personal or identifying information. Communicate your findings as appropriate, with a view to improving actions taken and results. Optional: If you will be doing multiple Debriefs for a given field situation, then once they are all completed you can do another analysis covering all the interview results and highlighting any commonalities.

TIPS FOR SUCCESS



- ▲ Creating a safe space: Choose a quiet, private room for the interview. Assure the staff member of confidentiality and build rapport with

them to ensure they feel relaxed during the interview process.

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▲ Recognize that everyone is different and one approach does not always fit all. The interviewer should be able to gauge the differences and tailor the interview to suit the interviewee's personality. For example, when dealing with persons who are naturally quiet, ask questions in a creative manner so that she can elicit a response.

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▲ Interviewers should have basic facilitation skills. In particular they should be experienced in starting conversations, encouraging people to talk, and thinking on their feet in order to adjust questions and steer conversations naturally.

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▲ When conducting interviews via telephone/Skype, be sure to listen carefully to the staff member, paying attention to verbal cues, noting and responding to any signs of discomfort on their part. As the Debrief is very much a voluntary exercise, if you do note any signs of discomfort, then offer to move on to another question, while underscoring the confidential nature of the Debrief.

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CASE STUDY / EXAMPLE



Ebola response

The Debrief method has been used in UNICEF during several major corporate emergency responses, dating back to the Haiti earthquake, and more recently during the Ebola response. The latter experience is summarized briefly here:

During the L3 Ebola emergency response, initially 21 staff members were sent on mission to Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone from Headquarters and Regional Offices. The response teams were multi-sectoral, representing an innovation for UNICEF.

UNICEF, like other organizations, was quick to realise that responding to Ebola would require innovative programming and thinking, and consequently there was interest to capture and apply learnings from the staff who participated in the initial response. Upon their return, the technical team members were invited to participate in voluntary Debriefs; 13 chose to do so.

Each Debrief began with the interviewer introducing the method, and then providing time for the staff member to engage in open reflection. Thereafter the interviewer asked a series of questions on mission timeliness, the effectiveness of cross-sectoral teams, accountability and clarity of roles. Participating staff were also asked to reflect on the mechanisms in place in Headquarters for

providing feedback, ensuring coordination and giving access to information.

Analysis of results indicated that the Debrief process was successful in creating an environment where staff felt comfortable sharing specific, relevant impressions. Many of the participants expressed satisfaction that their experiences, shared via the Debrief exercise, would be used by decision-makers as a basis for future improvement. The Debriefs were conducted at an early stage of the Ebola response. This made it possible to incorporate many of the learnings into the ongoing response, resulting in improved processes and outcomes.

In addition to the Debrief, other knowledge exchange/learning methods have been applied during the Ebola response. A series of reflection exercises modeled on the After Action Review method (which is described elsewhere in this Toolbox) were organized in various Headquarters Divisions and Country Offices. The findings from the Debriefs and the reflection exercises represented important inputs for a senior-level meeting examining challenges and lessons across the board in emergency response. The meeting led to the drafting of a management response plan to address the identified challenges.



REFERENCES

UNICEF Office of Emergency Programmes. Post Mission Debrief Script for Ebola Affected Countries (see Annex below).

CREDITS

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Annex: Post-mission Debrief script for Ebola-affected countries

The script was used during Debriefs of staff returning from participation in emergency response in Ebola-affected countries. The script includes the introductory remarks used at the start of the interview, and a set of relevant questions.

Introduction to Debrief: Explanation of purpose and approach

(Beginning of script as used by interviewer)

As I mentioned in my email, given the magnitude and complexity of the Ebola response, and how it is a unique crisis requiring response from across 3 country offices, RO and HQ, it presents us an important opportunity to capture some learning from the response thus far.

The Debrief is an opportunity for you to reflect on your experience in country and share thoughts on what worked well, and what the challenges were. In the first part of the Debrief we'll keep the conversation as open ended as possible to allow you to share your thoughts. I will then have a few specific questions to explore in the second half. If you'd like to speak more broadly to your experience during this L3, please indicate where your comments are specific to the mission and where they are more broadly related to the response.

The Debrief is considered confidential, and in preparing the post-debrief analysis, any identifying details will not be shared. We invite you to be frank in your response. It is often the details that allow us to craft solutions for moving forward, so it is best to be specific in sharing examples.

After the Debriefs are completed, an analysis of the findings will be shared as lessons with the Global Emergency Coordination for the Ebola response and other colleagues involved in the response. Given the iterative nature of the response, findings from these debriefs should be valuable in informing our response moving forward. It will also help inform future humanitarian policy and lessons learned.

Before we begin, do you have any questions?

Questions

1. The technical team missions took place early in the response- what are your thoughts on the timeliness of the mission?
2. Joint mission planning in this case was an innovation. How well do you think this went:
 - Operations wise?
 - From a programmatic point of view?
3. In terms of the composition of the teams with RO/HQ colleagues across sectors, what are your thoughts on how well this went? Challenges?
 - If well, please provide some specific examples of cross sectoral coordination
4. Did you feel there was clarity in terms of accountability?
5. How were interactions at the country level? Were you able to fulfill your role as advisor?
6. From a programmatic point of view and your specific technical expertise, what are your thoughts regarding the appropriateness/timeliness of the technical decisions made?

More broadly beyond the mission, we will now have a few specific questions relating to this L3 response.

7. How useful do you find the mechanisms in place at HQ level (EMTs, T-EMT, PD weekly meetings, regular calls with RO/HQ)?
8. What are your thoughts on interdivision coordination at HQ level: EMOPS (Emergency Operations), PD (Programme Division), HR (Human Resources), COMMS (Communications)?
9. What are your thoughts on finding easy access to information necessary to fulfill your role as technical advisor

(End of script)