

PLANNER'S WORKSHOP

education

➔ How to use fighter-pilot techniques to host better meetings



The Five Rs of an Effective Debrief

By Anthony "A.B." Bourke

This is the third installment in a three-part series on how meeting and event planners can apply fighter-pilot principles to their business.

In our first article (bit.ly/smFeedbackLoop) we discussed the similarities between fighter pilots and meeting planners. Both operate in high-speed, rapidly changing environments in which a single mistake can result in devastating consequences.

We introduced the concept of the "Feedback Loop," a battle-tested process that ensures peak performance on every mission. The Feedback Loop mandates that pilots conduct a briefing immediately before each mission and a debrief immediately after landing as a surefire way to accelerate the experience of their teams, reinforce standards, and strive for improvement every day.

The second installment of this series (bit.ly/smBourkeFiveRs) focused on the Five

Rs of an effective briefing: Roadmap, Results Desired, Room and Logistics, Roles and Responsibilities, and Risks.

In this third and final installment we will look in greater depth at the debrief, the single most important element of the Feedback Loop. The debrief assumes that no pilot has ever flown the perfect mission, and that no meeting planner has ever staged the perfect event. With this understanding, it is clear that we must use the debrief as a tool to accelerate the experience of our people and to ensure that the leaders of our organization get the honest feedback they need to make good decisions.

Reconvene

Debriefs will never happen unless they are planned in advance. This is not because your team doesn't want to debrief, but simply because we are all so busy that it will easily get brushed aside to take that additional phone

Who Is Running This Show?

The team leader always runs the debrief, even if the team includes members of higher rank. In the Air Force, the flight leader for most missions is a mid-level officer, like a captain. In many cases, this leader will have wingmen flying with him who outrank him, like lieutenant colonels or generals. But during the mission, the general assumes his role as wingman without question. The general will save all feedback for the debrief to pass on key lessons.

At the outset, the

team leader must create an environment where people will provide constructive feedback without fear of reputational risk. Meeting planners should adopt a similar protocol. The event manager or leader must take responsibility for her own events and the corresponding briefings and debriefings. The owner, president, or vice president must support these leaders as wingmen and create an environment where learning and improvement are valued above all else.

call or fit in one more meeting. Fighter pilots create standards for briefs and debriefs to occur. In my squadron, we always brief 90 minutes before takeoff and debrief 30 minutes after landing. This happens at the same time, every time.

Meeting planners can schedule debrief sessions in a similar manner. When your team is on site, you might create a standard to debrief 30 minutes after the conclusion of the last segment of each day. By the same token, when you're back in the home office, you can create a standard of holding a weekly debrief every Friday at 4 p.m. This is your chance to review the progress made against the "Results Desired" that you laid out in the Monday morning briefing.

Reset the Tone

However you structure it, the debrief must be a safe place where all team members — regardless of rank or seniority — are free to share their honest observations of how they and their teammates performed during the mission.

In the military, we create that safe space by stripping off our nametags and rank insignia at the beginning of the debrief (they attach to our flight suits with Velcro). With the nametags off, we create a learning environment where the sole purpose is to improve performance both as individuals and as a team. Our goal for the debrief is to capture generic lessons learned and roll them into tomorrow's plan. Where appropriate, we will also dis-

seminate those generic lessons to the rest of our squadron so that we can all benefit.

At the start of the debrief, the squadron leader stand ups and resets the tone. In business, this is most easily accomplished by the leader of your debrief, quickly reminding everyone by saying, "For the next 15 minutes we will be debriefing. This is our chance to learn and get better."

Review Objectives

Write down your agreed-upon objectives down for all to see. These objectives will limit the scope of the debrief and will prevent a 15- or 30-minute focused learning session from turning into a 45- to 60-minute rambling conversation. By only discussing the results

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desired, you have the opportunity to refocus the group when someone starts to lead you down a “rat hole.”

Refine

Now that we’ve set a safe tone for learning and clearly defined our objectives, we can let the feedback begin. This safe debriefing environment allows our newest second lieutenants to benefit from the mistakes and best practices of our senior pilots. This accelerates their experience and reinforces “the right way to do business.”

Meeting planners should praise their team for a job well done and then challenge them to ask the question, “Exactly why were we successful?”

Recap

When your timekeeper looks at the leader and says, “10 minutes remaining,” you can ask her to recap the learnings and next steps to make sure that everyone is aligned when walking out the door.

A typical recap might sound something like this: “Team, overall we ran a great meeting today and the client is very pleased. We learned that our new signage and mapping ensured that attendees knew where they were going and arrived on time. Tammy will make sure that those signs are up again tomorrow. Great job, team!”

To maximize their chances of success and minimize their chances of failure, fighter pilots have created a Feedback Loop as a

mechanism for continual improvement.

Using these same tools, meeting planners can incorporate briefing and debriefing into their daily and weekly routines as a surefire way to accelerate the experience of their people, drive better results, and delight their clients. **SM**

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