

Psychological safety in debriefings and retrospectives: A guide for managers

Debriefings, after action reviews (AAR), retrospectives or operational learning sessions are used to reflect on experiences and actions together, learn from successes and mistakes and derive improvements. Psychological safety plays a decisive role in this so that everyone can speak openly and honestly about their perspectives. Here are the key aspects for a successful and safe debriefing - with do's, don'ts and specific formulations.

1. Clarify the framework and objectives

A clearly defined framework and a goal provide orientation and create structure for the discussion.

Do's:

- "Our aim today is to reflect together on what went well and where we can improve."
- "Everything we discuss here serves our joint learning and further development."
- "There is no one to blame - it's about finding and understanding systemic causes. What and why, not who!"

Don'ts:

- "We're here to find out who's responsible."
- "It's just a compulsory event - I know everyone has more important things - we'll keep it short."
- "In the end, I decide what is relevant."

2. Promote open communication

All participants should feel invited to share their thoughts openly and without fear of consequences. It is important as a manager to speak out (!), not just tacitly assume that everyone will do so.

Do's:

- "Every perspective counts, please share what you've noticed."
- "There are no wrong opinions - everything helps us to get a complete picture."
- "Respectfully tell me exactly what I don't want to hear - including all the bad news, please!"
- "Let's be honest: Where can we improve?"

Don'ts:

- "This is not a point of discussion, but an instruction."
- "If you have nothing to say, it probably means that everything was perfect."
- "Anyone who disagrees must first do better."

3. Create a positive atmosphere

A positive mood encourages people to address critical points openly. Do's:

- "Thank you very much for taking the time to go through this together."
- "We had a lot of good approaches - let's see how we can build on them."
- "Your openness is the key to becoming stronger as a team."

Don'ts:

- "It won't do any good anyway, but we're doing it because we have to."
- "We address the mistakes straight away, the successes are obvious."
- "You're professionals, why do we have to discuss this at all?"

4. Analyse errors and problems without apportioning blame

The focus should be on the causes and not on the people in order to enable learning. To avoid simply treating the effects or symptoms incorrectly, the "5x Why" question is a suitable method.

Do's:

- "What were the specific circumstances that led to this decision/result?"
- "How did our system, our processes or our communication contribute to this?"
- "Is there anything we could change in our processes to avoid such situations?"

Don'ts:

- "Who messed this up?"
- "That shouldn't have happened to you."
- "Why did you do that?"

5. Ensuring equal rights

All participants should have an equal say, regardless of their role. Do's:

- "Has everyone had the opportunity to express themselves?"
- "I want to make sure we've heard all perspectives - are there any additions?"
- "What do you, who were perhaps less directly affected, think about the situation?"

Don'ts:

- "We don't need input from everyone - that takes too long."
- "The managers know better what happened anyway."
- Favouring certain people, voices or roles.

6. Learning and deriving improvements

A debriefing should always be concluded with concrete learnings and action points. Do's:

- "What can we take from this situation for the future?"
- "Are there specific measures that we should implement? Which ones? Who? How? By when?"
- "How can we ensure that we repeat this success?"

Don'ts:

- "That was an exception, we don't need to change anything."
- "I decide on the measures alone."
- "We'll discuss it later."

7. Asking questions and obtaining perspectives

Targeted enquiries promote reflection and broader perspectives. Do's:

- "What was the most important moment for you in this situation?"
- "Do you have any suggestions on how we could react differently?"
- "What support would you have needed at that moment?"

Don'ts:

- "That's pretty self-explanatory, isn't it?"
- "That was obvious, why are we even asking the question?"
- Do not ask questions of quieter people - they could have valuable insights.

8. Create a structured summary

At the end of a debriefing or retrospective, it is important to summarise the findings in a structured manner. This creates clarity and helps the team to translate the results of the discussion into concrete measures. A good structure could include the following points:

1. Summarise the most important points
2. What was good / positive?
3. What was not good / negative?
4. Lessons for the future: What and how will we do the same again in future?
5. Lessons learnt for the future: What and how will we do differently next time?

Do's:

- Re 1 (Most important points):
"Let's briefly summarise the most important findings from our discussion."
"I write down the key points so that we can easily follow them up later."
- Re 2 (What was good / positive?):
"What went particularly well in this situation and helped us to be successful?"
"Are there any positive aspects that we can adopt for the future?"
- Re 3 (What was not good / negative?):
"What could have gone better, and why?"
"Is there anything that has hindered us or made it unnecessarily complicated?"
- Re 4 (Learnings: What's the same again?):
"Which approaches or behaviours should we maintain in the same way?"
"How can we ensure that these positive aspects remain in place in the future?"
- Re 5 (Learnings: What's different?):
"What should we do differently next time?"
"What specific measures can we take to improve ourselves?"

Don'ts:

- Re 1: "I think everyone has the most important points in mind, we don't need a summary."
- Re 2: "The positive doesn't matter, we should only focus on the problems."
- Re 3: "We know what went wrong - why talk about it?"
- Re 4: "We don't have to think about what stays the same. The circumstances will change anyway."
- Re 5: "It's not important what we do differently next time. Let's just carry on as before."

Concrete formulations:

- "To make sure we're all on the same page, I'll summarise [summary]. Are there any additions?"
- "Our team has done an excellent job in [this area]. We should keep it that way."
- "The biggest challenge was [problem]. What can we do to avoid this in the future?"
- "For the next similar situation, we should [measure]. Do you agree?"
- "How do we ensure that [positive element] continues to work so well?"

9. Graduation with a positive grade

A positive conclusion strengthens team cohesion and motivates the team to actively implement the learnings.

Do's:

"Thank you very much for your openness and valuable contributions. You have shown that we can grow as a team."

"I am proud of what we have achieved together and I look forward to implementing our findings."

"This was an important step in our further development as a team - thank you all!"

Don'ts:

"That was exhausting, I hope we don't have to do that again soon."

"I was expecting more, but well, we're done."

"That was all far too theoretical, let's see if it can be implemented at all."

Conclusion:

The structured summary gives the debriefing or retrospective tangible results and ensures that the discussions do not fizzle out. In combination with a positive conclusion, you motivate the team to implement the findings and continuously improve.

In professional aviation, every flight and every training sequence is concluded with an operational team debriefing! Why is that? Because we can't afford to make the same mistakes over and over again. And at the same time because we know: Learning takes place in the reflection of actions and considerations. If this fails, important insights are not only forgotten by individuals or in the team, but also in the organisation and are therefore lost for future events. These are then "costly mistakes", because if they are not utilised as learning opportunities, there is a high chance that costly mistakes will be repeated again and again. Time spent on debriefings is time well spent!



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