

BOOK REVIEW

A Review of “Debrief to Win”

Robert “Cujo” Teschner, Chesterfield: RTI Press (2018)

Review By: Kristina Book

Debriefing is part of the lifeblood of the armed forces. We must constantly review our missions to identify critical and noncritical issues that can mean future success or failure if not addressed. We also look at the best use of the resources we have—time, money, people and materials. *Debrief to Win* brings this integral debrief lens to the public in an attempt to show the ways in which the military debrief can influence organizational culture, methods, and overall bottom line—in all walks of life.

In order to “debrief to win,” there needs to first be a set understanding of what debriefing is. Robert Teschner acknowledges that his process of debriefing is just one possible style and then hones into the method he recommends—the Objectives-Focused/Methodology-Based Debrief, a commonly used U.S. Air Force technique that he later breaks down as “the RAPTOR method.” As a pilot, former weapons school instructor, and professional, Teschner enthusiastically shares this U.S. Air Force debriefing method regarding learning, verifying ability and continuous process improvement. The key item Teschner focuses on is that debriefing is not always about the things that went poorly nor blaming failures on individuals; rather, it is about the overall root causes within a mission/event. To create a space for a discussion of the root causes without blame or shame, a leader must construct an environment where the debrief is a “team intervention event, designed to address the challenge human beings have in working together, in making decisions supportive of group goals and overcoming objections” (p. 47). Then, he explains how creating a culture where psychological safety thrives, with a “focus on the behavior and not the individual(s)” effectively builds a tribe (p. 48).

In a culture based on psychological safety, team members are able to call each other out and bring them into the discussions to improve overall success; all while adding a level of vulnerability and “moderate risk-taking, speaking [ones] mind, creativity, and sticking your neck out without fear of having it cut off” (p. 63). Within these underlying values (i.e., when individuals are seen, valued, and heard), the team can function at higher levels than without.

© 2023 The author(s)

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Citation: Journal of Character & Leadership Development 2023, 10: 281 - <http://dx.doi.org/10.58315/jcld.v10.281>

In addition to psychological safety, we also need to know the WHY of what we are doing. These may be our objectives. Teschner provides a hierarchy for identifying these using Mikal Belicove's framework from a 2013 *Forbes* article: Goals, Strategy, Objectives, and Tactics.¹ Goals are broad primary outcomes of an event, strategy is the approach you take to achieving a goal, objectives are the measurable steps you take to achieve a strategy, and finally tactics are the tools used in pursuit of an objective associated with a strategy. When we know the objective and the tactics then we have an understanding not only of the why but the how.

Objectives-Focused/Methodology-Based Debrief method involves a high degree of reflection especially in the flying world. Pilots utilise a tape review in which they collect information from video and audio sources to review what actually happened from various perspectives and not just personal recollection. In a non-flying world, this can be obtained through reviewing emails, messages, conversations, meetings, etc., and taking into consideration the perspectives of others. Once a tape review is completed, then the real work starts.

After reviewing the general information, the bulk of the RAPTOR method can begin. RAPTOR Debrief consists of six steps:

1. **Reconstruct** what happened
2. **Agree** on the fundamental questions and focus points
3. **Present** the driving factors (explore possible answers to the fundamental questions)
4. **Thoroughly agree** on the root causes
5. **Organize** a plan to improve or to maintain success, and finally

¹ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/mikalbelicove/2013/09/27/understanding-goals-strategies-objectives-and-tactics-in-the-age-of-social/?sh=6d43e1fd4c79>

6. **Rapidly improve** by “memorialization,” (i.e., by recording findings and next steps in a way that the debrief is available for future reference)

The setup for integrating the RAPTOR method into a culture is vital to achieve good results, just as creating a culture of accountable leadership where psychological safety is important to team success and the ability to have valuable debriefs. To have appropriate preparation for a valuable RAPTOR debrief, a leader and contributors to the debrief must take time to take notes on the event, review prior performance (may include review of past events), conduct a visualization of the event, and subsequently lead the debrief. Additional advice includes: focusing on understanding the why of the debrief (including improvement, growth, or maintenance of proficiency), a shared knowledge of who is leading and who is attending the debrief, and lastly defining the rules of engagement for the debrief.

Levels of analysis discussed in Chapter 5 bring up an interesting insight into the depth of which we go to get to the root cause of meeting an objective. Often in the military context, we may engage in an after-action report process that gives an overarching review of the tactics and execution of events. In some circumstances, the debrief is seen as an onerous requirement rather than an activity vital to the long-term success of an event or even an organization.

While Teschner's examples at times lack a level of depth, there are parts of this book that bring up important concepts that leaders should invest in during their developmental journey. If we can be accountable to our leadership and have psychological safety within our workspace—where we focus not only on the event or project at hand but on the fact that this is one of many events or projects we will collaborate on—we should utilize each one as an opportunity to better ourselves, our team, our processes, and our view of the end goal.

I encourage all to take a look at the concepts explained in Teschner's book and review your own debriefing processes. Ask yourself and your team: who is leading, who is involved and who is the level of analysis really getting to the root cause(s)? And finally, is

your culture one that has psychological safety where anyone can share without blame, shame, or belittlement? With this change in mindset, we can move toward being able to use debriefing to actually win in the work we each do.