

Team Leader Training

Debriefing



**FOOD FOR
THE HUNGRY**

Debriefing is perhaps one of the most underutilized tools in the short-term team experience. It's not that we don't think debriefing is important. Rather, many of us do not quite know how to debrief a team. Some Team Leaders get intimidated by the process of debriefing or perhaps feel ill-equipped to help team members understand what God has done. Others feel they are responsible for pulling the experience together in a way that is life-changing for team members. Debriefing does not need to be overwhelming for a Team Leader. In this discussion, we will not only look at the function of debriefing, we will also look at some practical tools by which you can effectively debrief your team.

As a preface to a discussion on debriefing, it can be helpful to look at some of the common thoughts or emotions that team members may be processing as the team's trip comes to an end. Some team members will feel sad about returning home. Many of them have been energized by the experience; they feel that it allowed them to singularly focus on God's desire for their life during their time in-country. Some of them may have felt that their devotions or quiet times with God were more poignant and meaningful. Thanks to positive team dynamics, some team members may have felt that they were truly part of a family. If these feelings are in stark contrast to their experience back home, the thought of going home can be heart-wrenching.

Other team members may experience frustration as they think about life back home. These individuals may be frustrated that neither Christians back home, nor the government, understands the plight of the people they have met. They may feel that the church is apathetic and unresponsive. These team members might even become frustrated with their own faith. Perhaps they came on this trip expecting to connect with God in a certain way, but it just didn't seem to happen.

Some team members might find it difficult to stay engaged as the team's time in-country comes to an end. Their thoughts may turn to people or places back home. They may begin to think about the e-mails they'll need to send or answer and all the people they'll need to touch base with.

Other team members may begin to question if their efforts mattered. As they look around them and see so much need still present, they may wonder if their efforts really made much of a difference. On the other hand, some team members may battle with arrogance as a result of their service. Some people tend to view short-term teams as a type of "spiritual merit badge" and they may feel that their service has made them a more "decorated" Christian than others.

It is common for team members to find themselves wrestling with a number of thoughts or issues. As mentioned earlier, it can be overwhelming for any team leader to feel that they are responsible for answering all the questions or wrapping up the trip in a way that results in a positive experience for all team members. It is important, therefore, to understand what debriefing is and what it is not.

First, the purpose of debriefing is not for you to answer all the questions that your team members are wrestling with. Nor should it make you feel responsible for creating an emotional crescendo to the team experience. Rather, debriefing is a time when team members can attempt to

identify some of the emotions that they are experiencing and try to understand why those emotions exist. Team members also begin the process of looking at next steps.

As a Team Leader, you are not responsible for manufacturing the work of the Holy Spirit. But you can help team members better engage in the work that the Holy Spirit is doing. The goal of the debriefing process is to get the team members to answer the question "Now what?"

In Mark chapter 2, Jesus is asked why His disciples did not fast like the disciples of either the Pharisees or John the Baptist did. Jesus' response is curious.

19Jesus answered, "How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? They cannot, so long as they have him with them. 20But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them, and on that day they will fast.

21"No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. If he does, the new piece will pull away from the old, making the tear worse. 22And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined. No, he pours new wine into new wineskins." Mark 2:19-22.

In essence, Jesus is saying that sometimes paradigms shift. Time will come when the old ways will not be able to accommodate the new ways. In the example Jesus gives, He even argues that trying to mix the old and the new can ruin them both.

This principle also holds true in a short-term team experience. In many ways, the short-term team experience can be considered a "new wine" of experience. Many team members will see God working in ways they have never experienced before. If team members put this "new wine" of experience into the "old wineskin" of their daily routines, both may be ruined.

Unfortunately, we've all seen this before. Team members come back from a mission trip excited and "on fire." But as they return to the familiar routines of work, school, relationships and daily life, their experiences on the field start to lose its urgency. Eventually, the trip only becomes a cool, treasured memory. Further impact upon the team member or the lives of those around them becomes minimal.

Why does this scenario occur so often? After experiencing God's presence in the field, why is it that team members often return to their old life?

The goal of debriefing is to help team members incorporate all they've seen and experienced into their lives while recognizing that they may need to make changes in their lives. Perhaps, team members will realize that they need to become more deeply involved in a ministry of their church, such as working with the homeless. Perhaps, they will want to work with the youth from church. Perhaps, team members will decide to regularly write and encourage one of the church's long-term missionaries. Maybe they will decide to sponsor a child or become a Food for the Hungry advocate. Other team members will realize that God is calling them to participate in longer-term field service. While there is no way to know exactly what God may call team

members to do, it is important that team members open their hearts and minds to God-inspired changes and opportunities upon returning home.

Debriefing is designed to allow team members to reflect upon what they've experienced and ask God for the next step. This section contains some simple group and individual exercises as well as principles that can be helpful in the process of debriefing a team.

It is important to understand that debriefing is a process, not a quick, get-it-done-with activity. While you'll likely want to plan a longer and more intentional "debriefing" time towards the end of your trip, it's important to spend some time each day debriefing your team. Again, debriefing is not a time wherein you as the Team Leader will preach a six-point sermon on all the ways that God has been at work throughout the course of the day. Rather, it is a time where team members can vocalize their thoughts and concerns.

Highlights and Lowlights

A simple, but effective exercise is the sharing of "highlights" and "lowlights." Start by giving team members a few minutes to quietly think about a highlight and lowlight of their day. Some team members might argue they had no lowlights, but don't let them off the hook that easy. Make them think of one. Until we reach heaven, we will have lowlights. Part of a team experience should be recognizing that things aren't perfect.

Once team members have each thought through their highlights and lowlights, give each team member a time to share. If it is a particularly large group or if time is limited, put a cap on the sharing time to only a couple of minutes for each team member. It's also important that team members be allowed the freedom to truly process as part of the group. In fact, it's a good idea to lay a ground rule that team members can only comment or provide additional thoughts on someone else's comment if they are given permission to do so. For example, if one team member's lowlight is that they didn't feel effective in ministering to kids during VBS, don't allow other team members to jump in and try to convince the team member that they were effective.

It's important that team members feel they have the freedom to vocalize their thoughts without feeling that they will be "shut down" or told why their thoughts or perceptions are inaccurate. It's also very easy for one or two team members to dominate the discussion or to comment on everyone's thoughts. Just be aware that even the most well-intentioned thoughts and comments can stifle the freedom of team members to share what's in their hearts. As a Team Leader, you may feel pressured to address some of the concerns and lowlights of your team members. Remember, the Holy Spirit is the teacher. At times it might be appropriate to let team members wrestle with a question or a hard truth. As Team Leaders, we should not minimize their thoughts or rush them to conclusion.

Individual Experiences

While some of the debriefing will be done as a team, as a Team Leader you should stress the importance of processing individual experiences. One way of stressing the value of personal

debriefing is by incorporating it into the team's schedule. One great tool in personal debriefing is consistent and intentional journaling. There is no right or wrong way to journal. Some people write letters to God. Some people write letters to themselves. Regardless of the actual format, encourage team members to be open and honest with their thoughts and feelings. Ask team members to list all the things that were accomplished, but also encourage them to be honest about their frustrations, disappointments and concerns.

This type of personal debriefing can start even before team members step foot on the field. Encourage team members to begin the process of journaling every day, months or weeks before they go to the field. Not only does it help turn the practice into a discipline that will carry into their time on the field, it also serves as a record of what God may be trying to show them during the pre-field stage. By the time the trip is finished, not only do team members have a log of their activities, they also have a means to reflect, years from now, on the journey God brought them through the short-term team experience.

While on the field, it's important to make sure that team members have time each day to pray and read God's Word. Daily prayer and journaling allow team members to process their experiences as they happen rather than wait until the end of the trip.

Re-Entry Plan

Another useful tool is to have team members develop a Re-Entry Plan. As team members return home, they will be bombarded with different demands on their time. They will want to reconnect with friends and family. They will need to get caught up on work or personal responsibilities. It's very easy to hold off on some of the commitments they may have made to God or themselves until things "settle down." If we're honest with ourselves, we'll recognize that our lives very rarely ever settle down. If team members don't return home with intentionality (or in other words, it's possible that some of the work God was doing in their hearts could get lost in the shuffle.

To help team members prepare for their return home, encourage them to first think through all the different things that they want or need to do upon returning home. Aside from doing task-oriented responsibilities such as going through the mail or doing laundry, remind them to include things such as resting and journaling, as well as focusing on some of the changes they would like to incorporate into their lives. Recognize, however, that no matter how carefully we think through these things, some unexpected things might come up. Therefore, in addition to the things team members can plan, encourage them to budget time for the things they can't realistically plan for.

Next, encourage team members to estimate a timeline to accomplish their goals, such as within:

The first two days of returning home

The first week of returning home

The first month of returning home

The first three months of returning home

The first six months of returning home

1 year of returning home

Following up with their supporters can also be a helpful tool in the debriefing process. If possible, encourage team members to write a follow-up thank-you letter to supporters while they are still on the field. As stated earlier, once they return home, team members will have busy schedules. Having a thank-you letter already completed will help alleviate some of the pressures. It also can be easier to write about the trip while the experiences are still fresh. If team members don't have time to write to their supporters while in-country, they can take advantage of the long layovers or the long flights home.

Returning Home

As suggested earlier, during the final days of the trip, it is good to set aside a slightly longer, more deliberate time for team debriefing. During this time, you can have team members share a highlight and lowlight of the trip as a whole. Another important part of a group debriefing time is prayer. In addition to praying for those they have met or the work they have participated in, ask each team member to vocalize a concern or prayer request that they have as they look towards returning home. Pray for each request or concern. If the group is large, it may be appropriate for each team member to be prayed for by one or two other people during the group prayer time.

Giving each team member a note card and asking them to write a short note to one another is a meaningful exercise that can be started a couple of days before the team's time ends. The card can mention something they appreciated about their fellow team member or ways in which they saw God used them during the course of the trip. During the final debrief time, have team members distribute the cards to each other. These cards can serve as a special reminder of the team's time together.

It can also be useful to have team members create prayer cards. Ask team members to commit to praying over the next year for two people they met during their trip. Distribute note cards and have team members write the person's name as well as something to help them remember the person. This reminder can be a physical description or a brief story that was meaningful about your time with this person. Have team members keep the cards and place them someplace where it will serve as a reminder of the commitment to pray.

Remind team members that their friends and family also have had experiences or events that happened while they were gone. Therefore, team members should ask friends and family about what had gone on in their lives while the team was away.

Let your team members know that not everyone will show great interest in all the things that happened during their trip. This could often leave the team member feeling hurt, misunderstood or unappreciated. Remind team members that their service was unto the Lord and not those

around them. While those around us may not fully understand or recognize what we have experienced, God does understand. God had a plan and purpose for our trip, and our participation was an act of obedience to Him.

Finally, remember that debriefing does not necessarily end once the team is safely back home. Rather, as a Team Leader you should make yourself available to team members (or even seek out team members when appropriate) as they continue to process the experience. Sometimes the things that God wants to show the team members may not even begin to sink in until the team returns home. God wants to continue to work in our lives. Encourage team members to continue seeking God's guidance and direction in their lives.

The short-term team experience is an incredible tool for transformation both in the communities we serve as well as in the communities where we live. God places each one of us in a specific time and place for a reason. In Acts 17:26-27, Paul says God determines the times and places where we should live, and He does this so that those around us could "seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him."

In other words, God has placed each one of us within our specific sphere of influence. It's possible that God wants to use a team member's experience to point others to God. Remind team members that although the trip is over, our mission continues. Every day, we are surrounded by people who are in desperate need of a Savior. Encourage team members to view their team experience as God's way of equipping them so they may be able to reflect the love of God to those around them.