



STAFF BRIEFINGS

CANADIAN ASSOCIATION OF FIRE CHIEFS

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INTRODUCTION

A major task of every Fire Chief and senior officer is to brief others. The word briefing is commonly applied to any kind of oral presentation, but a true departmental briefing has but one primary purpose - to inform - and from this elicit a response in one of three areas:

1. to secure the listener's understanding of a particular operation, situation, or proposed solution to a problem;
2. to enable the listener to take action effectively or perform a certain task or procedure;
3. to give the listener information on which to base decisions.

Whatever its nature, the aim of an oral briefing is normally to help a busy officer quickly assimilate essential information and spare them unnecessary work. The oral briefing also enables them to question the briefing officer, while providing a forum to discuss a problem with other staff members.

CHARACTERISTICS

The ideal oral briefing has three virtues - accuracy, clarity, and brevity. Accuracy and clarity characterize all good speaking, but brevity distinguishes the briefing from other types of informative speeches. The ideal briefing should be concise and direct, and should contain no extraneous material, no matter how interesting or entertaining it may be. Staff officers must develop an ability to cover a lot of material in a short time. Such an ability is essential for the success of any senior officer.

The overriding objective of an oral briefing is to serve the requirements and desires of the audience. This means that staff officers must determine their superior's wishes and brief accordingly rather than abide by a set of fixed rules. Some senior officers like a comprehensive briefing; others wish to have only a summary of facts; most expect a briefing to end with conclusions and, if appropriate, recommendations. Oral briefings call for great care; a senior officer will often base important decisions on briefings and feedback from staff.

RESEARCH

Research must be done in detail. Follow through with the research until you have exhausted all leads and you are confident that you will be able to answer any questions concerning the briefing task.

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STRUCTURE

The structure outlined in this section will serve as a basis for most briefings. However, it must be modulated by the particular requirements of your listener.

When drafting your outline, you will find that the traditional three part structure (introduction, body, conclusion), is adaptable to the accuracy, clarity, and brevity necessary in a good oral briefing.

Introduction

1. Make it short and to the point.
2. Avoid background information the listener knows or does not need.
3. Attention getting devices are not normally required or desired. The audience usually has a need or desire to be attentive.
4. Often, no more is needed than brief answers to the following questions:
 - (a) What is the briefing about? (aim and, if necessary, scope).
 - (b) Why is the briefing given?

Body

1. Be very critical in your selection of material. The following questions should help you to accept or reject material:
 - (a) What does the listener need to know?
 - (b) What specific information has the listener asked for?
2. The detail included in the body requires careful consideration. Because you must be brief you may have to omit many details, but beware! This may cause you to oversimplify a complicated subject. One way to avoid this pitfall is to delegate details and supporting evidence to handouts or to visual displays of some kind.
3. Logical organization and development are paramount. You should therefore consider the following points:
 - (a) repetition should be avoided;

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- (b) the sequence of material should be such that the listener is not tempted to ask questions during the briefing;
 - (c) you should seek to make the listeners' assimilation and understanding of the material as easy as possible by whatever means are at your disposal;
 - (d) the main points should be highlighted.
4. Your briefing will probably be incomplete if it does not answer the following questions: What? How? Who? When? Where? Make sure you answer these questions.

Conclusion

1. Make it short and positive. If necessary, include a short summary of the main points.
2. Make sure any specific conclusions, recommendations, proposals, directions stand out clearly.

PRESENTATION

The nature of the occasion, the size and make-up of your audience, the availability of specific equipment are some of the factors that will influence the method of presentation.

Delivery

Emotional appeals have no place in a departmental briefing. Your listener will be justified in doubting your objectivity if your presentation is charged with emotion. This does not mean that your delivery should be dry and lifeless - quite the contrary. Because you must present pertinent information and nothing more, you should strive for a crisp, animated and interesting delivery. Do not be afraid to be imaginative; on the other hand, do not let dramatics obscure the purpose or content.

Handouts

In attempting to be brief, you should try to relegate some detail to handouts. Handouts will make your listener more disposed to accept the validity of the information. Because they know they can check your evidence, they will be less inclined to ask needless questions, and will go along with simple visual aids because they know more detailed information is available. On the other hand, you must take care that using handouts does not oversimplify your briefing.

Team Briefings

Often two or more persons jointly give a briefing, each giving only the essential information from their own sphere of interest. In briefing for an operational plan, for instance, one might cover administration and logistics and the other the tactics. A team briefing must appear as an integrated unit to the listener. Therefore organization and coordination are paramount. Take particular care to ensure there is no repetition and more important - no gaps.

Policy

Policy, orders, and concepts of how an operation or project will be handled are given by the Fire Chief or Deputy Chief only. Ensure a clear distinction exists between material which is informative and that which is directive.

Questions

Normally no questions should be taken during the briefing. Leave a few minutes between the end of the briefing and the taking of questions. This will enable working groups to discuss their problems and to determine important questions. Take questions in an orderly fashion: from left to right, by seniority; in the sequence of operational participation, etc. All questions should be addressed to, and answered by, the Chief or ranking senior officer conducting the briefing. Only they should provide policy or decision answers, by may direct specialists to provide information within their expertise. You must be well prepared to answer questions properly. You must have available a reservoir of facts equal to the occasion. Make sure that you thoroughly understand each question before attempting to answer.

Visual Aids

The use of visual aids can save valuable time and can render much assistance in increasing the effectiveness of a briefing. In planning your visual aids keep the following suggestions in mind:

1. Keep aids simple and to a minimum.
2. Ensure that aids support the briefing - not vice versa.
3. Make aids large enough and so positioned that the audience can see them easily and clearly.
4. Remove or cover them when their use is finished.
5. Do not block or stand in front of your aids.

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6. Practise their use with appropriate assistants.
7. Do not talk to the aids – use an assistant with a pointer, if necessary.
8. Use pointers accurately. Avoid broad-brush treatment.

Rehearsal

Rehearsals are essential to ensure that time constraints can be met, and to assure the positive results that only a polished performance can make. Rehearsals are necessary for all briefings, no matter how simple the material or how practised the cast. The larger the cast, the more numerous and complex the training aids, the more essential to hold rehearsals.

STAGING

Warning

Give the audience notice well in advance so that the correct people may attend and will have the opportunity to participate. This notice must include those providing administrative support to the briefing.

Reception

Ensure that those attending are received both from the point of view of general administration and of their specific interest and part in the briefing.

Briefing Room

1. Make the layout for the convenience of the attendees and not the cast.
2. Plan the seating arrangements carefully. If possible, entrance doors should be at the rear. Sit working groups together, with a functional relationship between groups, if at all possible. Provide an “out of the way” seating space for observers.
3. Limit responsibility for coordination of all briefing room arrangements to one person. Their checklist should include the following:
 - (a) security arrangements;
 - (b) lighting, projection equipment, sound systems;
 - (c) chairs, tables;
 - (d) pens, pencils, stationery, etc.

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ORAL BRIEFING CHECK LIST

Preparation

1. Have you clearly identified the aim of the briefing?
2. Have you identified all the audience's requirements?
3. Has your research exhausted all leads?
4. Is the material accurate?
5. Have you anticipated questions and prepared data banks to support your answers?

Content and Organization

6. Is all the material essential? Have you eliminated extraneous material?
7. Is the material clear?
8. Are the main points highlighted?
9. Will the briefing meet imposed time constraints?
10. Is the briefing as short as possible?
11. Have you eliminated repetition?
12. Will your presentation facilitate easy assimilation and understanding of the material?
13. Does the introduction answer the questions: What? Why?
14. Does the body answer the questions: What? How? Who? When? Where?
15. Does the conclusion clearly delineate specific conclusions, recommendations, proposals, directions?

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Presentation

16. Is your briefing objective?
17. Have you considered handouts/visual displays for supporting information?
18. Will method of presentation suit the location, audience, subject, occasion?
19. Have you planned the direction/conduct of the question period?
20. Have you rehearsed sufficiently?
21. Have you identified and organized any assistance required?
22. Have you planned and prepared visual aids? Have you rehearsed their use?