

DEBRIEF TO WIN

How America's Top Guns
Practice Accountable Leadership...
and How You Can, Too!

ROBERT "CUJO" TESCHNER



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DEBRIEF TO WIN: How America's Top Guns Practice Accountable Leadership...and How You Can, Too!

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*I dedicate this book first of all to my dearest Diane,
My beautiful and caring bride—
who saved my life from cancer by insisting on a second opinion.*

*I could not have found a better partner and friend.
You love me without question;
Most importantly—you love and care for our five beautiful children,
who are my other true joys in this life!*

*I furthermore dedicate this book to my precious children;
I pray that someday our journey from 2014 to now makes abundant
sense. To Michael, Christopher, Lucy, Stephen and Nicholas,
All My Love, Dad*

“There is no limit to the good you can do if you don’t care who gets the credit.”

General George C. Marshall, USA

“In matters of principle, stand like a rock; in matters of taste, swim with the current. Give up money, give up fame, give up science, give up earth itself and all it contains, rather than do an immoral act. And never suppose that in any situation, or under any circumstances, it is best for you to do a dishonorable thing.

Whenever you are to do a thing, though it can never be known but to yourself, ask yourself how you would act were all the world looking at you, and act accordingly.”

President Thomas Jefferson

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CHAPTER 1

WHAT IS A DEBRIEF?

“

YOU MUST NEVER CONFUSE FAITH THAT YOU WILL PREVAIL IN THE END—WHICH YOU CAN NEVER AFFORD TO LOSE—WITH THE DISCIPLINE TO CONFRONT THE MOST BRUTAL FACTS OF YOUR CURRENT REALITY, WHATEVER THEY MIGHT BE.

Admiral James B. Stockdale, USN

*Highest-ranking US POW in Vietnam, Medal of Honor Winner,
as quoted in “Good to Great” by Jim Collins*

Webster's Collegiate College Dictionary defines "debrief" as: "to interrogate (as a pilot), usu. upon return (as from a mission) in order to obtain useful information."²³ While I don't find this definition especially satisfying ("useful information" is a poor description of what we're really obtaining), it is important to note that Webster's picks aviation as its basis for defining the term. This is not to suggest that debriefs are exclusive to aviation—different communities use different terms to describe the same basic process.

"After-Action Review" is the term used in the Army, whereas the Marine Corps tends to use "Lessons Learned Reports" or a related variant. In the software development world, the term is "Retrospectives" and there's an entire industry dedicated to facilitating this form of debrief. But pilots have been debriefing their missions as long as they've been flying, and fighter pilot debriefs—the kind I'll be describing—derive from a distinguished and lengthy heritage.

Origins

Fighter pilot debriefs have been around since at least World War I. In a U.S. Army Command and General Staff College paper titled "Armed for Success: External Factors of the World War I Aces" by Maj John P.H. Rayder, the author examines the experience of Edward Mannock. Mannock was "An exceptional leader" who "conducted thorough briefs and debriefs—stressing formation, aggressiveness and tactical judgment" while training the members of his flight.²⁴ More broadly, Rayder notes that late in WWI, "specialized pilot training was established at

the institutional level, taking form in an equivalent of today's fighter weapons schools. Prior to this the responsibility for pilot training rested solely upon individuals within the fighting units. It was this training opportunity at the front that the aces influenced." Furthermore, "This training consisted of specified conditions which included preflight briefs, post-flight debriefs and dedicated analysis and understanding of the tactics employed."²⁵ Finally, this brief-debrief process was used by both sides. Rayder notes that, "Early German squadron-level training programs of detailed preflight briefs, post flight debriefs, and tactics analysis laid the foundation for the air combat success of several German pilots...The Germans were in command of air combat in early 1917 as a result of their training and the superiority of the Albatros [sic] fighter."²⁶

The one common thread between the fighter debriefs that started in WWI, and the various forms of debriefs previously listed, is the *nature* of the organization that chose to use this tool. Organizations that employ debriefs are those that harbor *an intense desire to win*. Winning teams use debriefs, and not just occasionally, but as a regular, standard practice. Some examples of these types of teams include U.S. Navy SEALs, Army Rangers and the Special Operations Community in general.

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Sports teams, both professional and amateur, use a version; for example, in 2011 the New York Giants held a debrief every 1-2 days after their games to understand what worked and what didn't.²⁷ They went on to win the Superbowl that year.

Many businesses get this fact, and many of them are attempting to use this capability to their advantage. In his book, *Good to Great*, author Jim Collins notes that the companies that “Conduct autopsies, without blame” have developed cultures where the “truth is heard”. Those autopsies are a form of debrief. Collins goes on to note that, “Leadership does not begin just with vision. It begins with getting people to confront the brutal facts and to act on the implications...One of the primary ways to de-motivate people is to ignore the brutal facts of reality.”²⁸ Debriefs start with the brutal facts and use these to determine whether or not the job was done correctly. Not doing so is dangerous; in his book *Project Retrospectives*, Norman Kerth suggests, “By avoiding a review of a failed project, the community loses a valuable opportunity to learn from its experience, possibly leaving the door open for the same kind of failure to happen again.”²⁹

In their best-selling book *Extreme Ownership*, popular speakers and leadership trainers Jocko Willink and Leif Babin make frequent reference to the constancy of their post-mission debriefs. They specifically note, “The best SEAL units, after each combat operation, conduct what we called a “post-operational debrief.” No matter how exhausted from an operation or how busy planning for the next mission, time is made for this debrief because lives and future mission success depend on it.

A post-operational debrief examines all phases of an operation from planning through execution, in a concise format. It addresses the following for the combat mission just completed: What went right? What went wrong? How can we adapt our tactics to make us even more effective and increase our advantage over the enemy? Such self-examination allows SEAL units to reevaluate, enhance, and refine what worked and what didn't so that they can constantly improve. It is critical for the success of any team in any business to do the same and implement those changes into their future plans so that they don't repeat the same mistakes.”³⁰

As is the case anywhere, there are many approaches to the general process of debriefing, and each has its defined purpose. Several forms of debriefs that stand out include Process-sequential (strong overlap with teaching); Psychological (typically used post-trauma); Agile Retrospectives (stemming from a software development focus); Unstructured (ad hoc, the most common type in use); and Objectives-focused / methodology-based. It is useful to briefly review these types:

*The **Process-Sequential Debrief** is my explanation of the type of debrief we use in Air Force pilot training. It's centered around the concept that every part of every mission is evaluated post-flight. The various components of the mission are judged against a set of standards, and grades are assigned for each phase of flight and mission element. By following the flow of the debrief/grade sheet, the instructor pilot is able to instruct the student on any deviations from standards. The process for debriefing a roughly one-hour mission lasts roughly one hour.

The take-away from this type of debrief is both an understanding of how to correct any mistakes moving forward, as well as an overall grade that helps determine student progression and overall standing. This kind of debrief is especially effective in a one-on-one setting centered in an academic or learning context.

*The **Psychological Debrief** is an important tool, especially following traumatic experiences. A lot of work was conducted in this field in World War II, to help those who had witnessed and experienced horrors in the execution of that war. My own father was a facilitator of one of these types of debriefs, as he was assigned the several months-long task of debriefing a returning Prisoner of War from Vietnam. A lot of what my father did was open the floodgates for horrible memories of the torture and trauma experienced by this individual at the hands of his captors. Today, Police departments use these types of debriefs to work with people who have been traumatized due to crime, and there are a variety of ways in which this version of the debrief can be effectively harnessed to tremendous benefit.

*The **Agile Retrospective** offers many useful techniques to help software designers figure out how to build software better. This community relies heavily on the use of games to help do things like build psychological safety, as well as to spur conversation and communication among members of the design team. This game-centric approach preferred by the Retrospective facilitator offers much in terms of setting the conditions for debrief success, especially early on in the adoption process. Because of its utility in the software engineering world, the process has been transferred into other domains that seek

a workable debriefing methodology. One of the biggest problems with applying Retrospectives in non-software domains is the non-repeatability of this methodology; each Retrospective Facilitator comes armed with a toolkit of games and approaches to spur learning, any of which he or she might employ to spark discussion and arrive at conclusions. Since the choice of games is an independent decision of the Facilitator, and since this methodology isn't centered on evaluating performance against a set standard, the results can and do vary. In addition, the accuracy of the results achieved by this means is also highly variable, leading to a widely varying level of quality. Much of the "success" of this approach is tied to the skill of the Facilitator who is, by definition, someone that is brought in from outside the team to guide it—often over the course of many days—to produce conclusions. Later, we'll discuss the implications of conducting debriefs that lead to faulty conclusions; know that Agile Retrospectives contain a large margin of error in their outcomes. Ultimately, the inefficiency of this approach, its reliance on the guidance of an outside Facilitator and the fact that the results can vary so wildly, are all challenges in adapting approach to debriefing outside of the field for which it was originally designed. The good news is that these kinds of debriefs are a great starting point, and can help accelerate an organization's adoption of fighter pilot debriefs.

*The **Unstructured Debrief** is one where a group organizes to review a process, an event, a planning cycle etc., but lacks a defined methodology. Areas of concern are discussed, points are raised, but there is no real ability to repeat the

process per-se because there is no real process to begin with. It's an ad-hoc effort meant to help arrive at worthwhile conclusions. As such, good outcomes are entirely possible, but so are faulty ones. Strong personalities tend to dominate these kinds of debriefs, and those who can't or won't dominate often go unheard. The real problem with this approach is that those who go unheard can't provide their perspectives of what took place, which means that the true picture of what actually happened is lacking. An unstructured debrief may actually reinforce those "golden accident" tendencies in successful organizations that nevertheless have serious problems. People may believe that an unstructured debrief led to positive outcomes, but the absence of methodology means that what looks good may really be faulty conclusions. We'll cover an example of one of these and the associated outcome in Chapter 6.

*The **Objectives-Focused / Methodology-Based Debrief** is the type of debrief we're going to focus on here. This is the debrief of choice for the fighter pilot—the way the High-Reliability Organization known as the American fighter squadron operates day-in, day-out, across the entire globe. This approach works because it's based on science. It is a repeatable methodology that can be applied in a wide range of contexts. It's centered on task accomplishment and can be applied to everything from high-complexity combat missions to Human Resource concerns, from risk mitigation to helping a team build resilience. The context of the debrief determines the overall approach as well as the degree of specificity or detail arrived at. This, in-turn, determines the amount of time and degree of

sophistication spent on the process itself; for example, a debrief addressing why a life was lost in an aircraft accident will be much more comprehensive than one dealing with why the team successfully achieved its objectives. The Objectives-Focused/Methodology-Based debrief is a variation of the “Task-Oriented Debriefing” outlined by Dr. Arieh Shalev in his report titled, “Historical Group Debriefing Following Combat,”³¹ and traces its roots to the beginning of fighter aviation in the early 1900’s. That said, and regardless of the context, all fighter pilot debriefs serve the same overall purpose: *to understand the absolute truth of what happened so as to evaluate performance and drive future improvement.* This specific process drives the development of a high-performance culture, which helps fighter squadrons consistently win in the toughest of environments—the high-speed, high-G force, high-complexity environment of air-to-air combat. Armed with an ability to employ this methodology, every leader, at every level, in any organization will be capable of driving massive process improvement.

Lastly, it’s critical to note that debriefing is not a fad, trend, or pseudo-science. The fighter pilot debrief methodology is a battle-tested process that nurtures constant improvement in individuals and organizations. It nurtures at its core a deep understanding of human psychology and the study of human interactions. It is the one critical element necessary for High-Performing Teams to function correctly. It is also the way that you change organizational culture for the better.

My Definition of a Debrief

At its absolute core, a properly-run debrief is the actual practice of Accountable Leadership. It's an accountability practice because everyone on the team, both follower and leader alike, will be evaluated on the quality of the decisions they made from planning through execution. It's a leadership skill because someone has to be in charge and actually lead—a debrief is a process that can, because of the nature of the human interactions involved, be touchy.

The whole point of this accountability process and lead-

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ing effectively is the development of teams that practice great Teamwork, which is separate and distinct from Taskwork.³²

To be clear, Taskwork is the “doing of things,” the part that’s relatively easy and can

often be done by individuals operating by themselves, even if they’re formally part of a team. Teamwork, on the other hand, is the piece that must be present for a team to actually function as a team. The debrief facilitates turning what Dr. Eduardo Salas refers to as “Teams of Experts into Expert Teams.”³³ The debrief is a team intervention event, designed to address the challenges human beings have in working together, in making decisions supportive of group goals, and overcoming objections. Leaders should have a clear “understanding of what drives effective teamwork, such as appropriate communications, backup

behavior, role clarity, and shared mental models.”³⁴ Good teamwork depends on quality debriefs.

Besides Accountable Leadership, What Else Can You Gain from a Good Debrief?

To answer this question, I’ll first borrow from the world of Agile Retrospectives, the software development debrief process. I’ll do so because I think the following does a very nice job of capturing the core “whys” for those who aren’t familiar with the need for effective debriefs. Among the many reasons to conduct a debrief is the fact that debriefs allow teams and individuals 1) To learn and improve rapidly without blame or shame; 2) To celebrate success; and 3) To build a tribe and pass along tradition.³⁵

The first point is absolutely key—we have to, as teams, learn to fail forward, to accept the fact that we can’t be our best if we don’t push the envelope and miss the mark at times. Doing so in an objective way, one where we “focus on the behaviour [sic] and not the individual(s)”³⁶ is essential to building what we’ll soon discover to be psychological safety. The key standard underlying this approach is that we’re not doing anything illegal, immoral, or uncalled for. Any mistakes we make are exactly that: mistakes made while trying to do our best. Daniel Burrus highlights the importance of organizations learning to “fail fast”. Specifically, “Not only does Failing Fast move you past the emotions and dynamics of failing, it helps you to learn faster. In other words, you interpret what happened, share what you’ve learned from the mistake, and move forward, rather

than pointlessly wallowing in it.” Furthermore, “If you don’t share what you learn when you fail, you’re effectively allowing someone else to replicate the same mis-step. To make the most of the value of failing, let those around you in on what you’ve learned. The faster you fail, the faster you learn!”³⁷ We see this in Major League Baseball, where players review their swings immediately after their at-bats or between innings, based on video taken in real-time.

The second point is probably one that many organizations struggle with a lot—celebrating success on an individual level. There are plenty of reasons for this. Chief among these is that fact that in a time-constrained environment, it’s extremely easy to focus on those things that didn’t go well, overlooking those that did. Often, team members struggle with the sense that they aren’t appreciated for the good that they’ve done; debriefs actually help address the basic human need for affirmation and positive recognition. Specifically, the debrief provides an outstanding, regular forum in which leaders get to highlight their teams as a whole, as well as individual team members, for the great work that was done. In addition, the Objectives-Focused / Methodology-Based Debrief ensures that everyone present understands not only *how* but *why* the great work that was done achieved success. This methodology validates and verifies the activities that the leader can then praise, making the process objective. It also offers an opportunity for other members of the team to learn how they can replicate the success being highlighted. In other words, everyone gets to win.

I look at the third point and see building a tribe as

defining our culture, which is the experience I had practicing this approach over my Air Force career. Chris Fussell, in his book *One Mission: How Leaders Build a Team of Teams*, notes, “Because members usually do not choose which team would be the best culture fit for them, instead being assigned to a team, the individual adapts to the culture of the tribe.”³⁸ While Chris is referring to Navy SEALs, the same applies to the way fighter pilots arrive in their squadrons—mostly by selection, not by choice. Debriefs help these new arrivals understand and adapt to the culture, which is critically important when it comes to building high-performing teams. New members must quickly learn and embrace the culture for the team to remain high-performing throughout disruption and change. The debrief is the absolute best way to ensure this happens.

But What’s the Real Bonus from Implementing Proper Debriefs?

Simply put, learning how to debrief to win gives you the ability to move into the realm of anticipatory thinking, a framework that allows companies and organizations to thrive in the midst of disruption. Says Daniel Burrus in his book, *The Anticipatory Organization*, “Organizations of all types and sizes have traditionally relied on their ability to react as quickly as possible to shifting challenges, the demands of the marketplace, and other types of disruptions. That’s often referred to as agility. Being agile is very important, but it is simply no longer good enough. We are living in an era of increasing disruption—not simple change, but outright transformational change. Revolutionary

technology and business concepts are rendering traditional systems and modes of thinking less relevant and even obsolete at an increasing pace.”

The debrief serves as a means of rapidly correcting and then feeding these corrections into the next phase of planning. *In an anticipatory organization, planning is always on-going.* Results are constantly scrutinized, and plans are adapted and changed to meet emerging needs. Most importantly, plans are adjusted to anticipate disruptions, allowing anticipatory organizations to thrive where non-anticipatory organizations find themselves struggling just to hang on.

How Does Your Company Debrief?

In my time working as a professional business consultant and leadership trainer I’ve been fortunate to have worked with successful businesspeople and other professionals who uniformly acknowledge the tremendous need for effective debriefs. Initially, some of these business veterans believe that they already employ something similar in their organizations. When faced with a few pointed questions it’s almost always immediately clear that the expectations of what determines the quality of a debrief vary wildly. In the end, it is evident there’s a tremendous gap between where a company is right now in employing this tool, and where it is that they could—and should—be. This stems from the fact that there is currently very little training available on how to properly employ debriefs in a business setting. There’s more written about its utility than on how to do it effectively and properly, which presents a problem.

It is abundantly clear that some of our sharpest organizations are trapped, executing what we'll come to know as "Level 1" debriefs, where they should be at "Level 3" (we'll define these levels shortly). What a Level 1 debrief translates to is error identification and explanation, demonstrated in statements such as:

"We missed the mark this month because Sam was out sick for two weeks. We'll do better next month because Sam is better now."

While this type of answer identifies both an error and a potential answer to why that error happened, it is ***entirely insufficient*** for an organization that wants to win. It pointedly fails to explain why the success of the organization is dependent on "Sam." We'll discover later the difference that Levels 2 and 3 debriefs bring to this discussion, tying these qualities to the Level 5 leadership traits Jim Collins shares in his outstanding book *Good to Great*.

The Need for a Massive Sense of Urgency

What I've ultimately found is that moderately-sized Fortune 500 companies are sometimes tragically unprepared for the form of combat in which they are currently engaged. Their sights are set too low; they really don't plan well, and they're too often satisfied with "keeping the good thing going," which is whatever success it is they enjoy today. Remember, it was specifically this kind of thinking that destroyed the American auto and steel industries. Most critically, they lack the sense of

urgency that comes with a combat mindset.³⁹ “Business is only business” they say to me; they share that they don’t have the pressure of flying a high-performance aircraft in harm’s way, which means that they feel they can afford to make mistakes and take unnecessary risks. I completely disagree.

I admittedly come from a completely different world—one where the stakes are incredibly high and where the price of failure is absolutely unacceptable. I’ve lost friends who have paid the ultimate price and I struggle with those losses. I disagree with those who say business isn’t the same as combat, because people’s lives and fortunes are absolutely at stake in business. Whether it’s the owner, the shareholders or, critically, *the workers themselves*, or the countless others affected by the success or failure of a given company, business is a dangerous game in which there are winners and losers. I can’t bear to see good teams lose—and I see losses happening around me in business on a daily basis. The losses I see stem from the way businesses operate, and they are tolerated because many people truly don’t sense the urgency at hand. That is, they don’t sense it until it is too late. At that point, the company has laid off a bunch of workers, closed several locations, stopped promotions, eliminated raises and incentives, and seen tensions mount daily. These are companies where leaders are unable to provide appropriate, usable, productive feedback. These are companies that don’t know how to grow leaders because they don’t practice sound leadership. And thus, the cycle perpetuates itself.