Guide to Team Briefings for Managers

Author: Head of Organisation Development Training and Diversity
Date of publication: December 2009

Think before you print
If you need to print a copy of this guidance, print page range 2-11.
GUIDE TO TEAM BRIEFINGS

Introduction

This guidance seeks to clarify the roles and responsibilities of line managers to ensure the process of team briefings runs smoothly and effectively.

What is Team Briefing?

Team briefing is an effective method of sharing information in complex organisations. Team briefings are also useful tool for cascading urgent messages throughout the organisation at short notice - at times of major change or crisis.

Team briefings are one of the most effective ways to develop a flow of information up and down the organisation. They promote open and consistent communications at all levels and locations in the organisation, and help prevent the misunderstandings that can develop when ‘news’ is circulated via the grapevine.

Team briefing is a structured process for communicating important information through the organisation. A core brief is developed and endorsed by senior managers, before being cascaded through the organisation at a series of face-to-face sessions run by managers and team leaders.

A key part of the briefing system lies in helping people throughout the organisation to understand what the core brief means to them. Although people want to know the organisational message, they are more likely to be interested in the impact on their own department.

So each manager, team leader or briefer, needs to develop a local brief by:
- Taking each of the main points in the core brief and making them relevant to his or her team
- Adding other appropriate local content to the brief

The success of team briefings used during times of major change depends on all managers keeping to the key messages contained and responding to feedback. Responses to feedback and questions might be possible there and then or it may be more sensible for feedback and questions to be taken away for consideration and feedback given at a later point. The important thing is that a response is given.

Benefits

- Rapidly develop a shared understanding of the situation
- Provide an informal forum for people to ask questions and develop their understanding of organisational issues
- Improve upward feedback and communication
- Gather and exchanging information
- Help people to understand and accept change
- Meetings result in clear actions, responsibilities and deadlines
Opportunities

- Gaining ownership and involvement through participation
- Adding variety by involving a number of presenters - from the team and "guest speakers"
- Agenda items can be tailored to various target audiences - but based on the same key messages from the "top level" bulletin

Potential problems .... and how to avoid them

- Late starts
- Postponement
- Poor time management - overrunning, misallocation of time to agenda items
- Overloaded agenda
- Unclear aims
- Sidetracking and falling into detail
- Cynicism due to ineffective meetings held in the past

These all relate to discipline either in terms of time or focus and can be avoided by bearing in mind the following:

- Don't wait more than five minutes for latecomers
- Ensure that an agenda (with timings against each item) is circulated in advance
- It's better to have shorter meetings more often than infrequent long meetings
- Detail can be handled through written communication as a follow-up
- Break agenda items down into small, well-defined subject areas
- Encourage participation
- Agree outcomes and actions

Bringing the process to life - creating a dialogue

The core information to be used in team briefing is the regular bulletin from the senior management which all employees will have had the opportunity to read prior to their briefing.

Each manager and guest speaker will discuss and explain different facets of the bulletin, according to the needs and interests of their immediate team. Questions arising from each team will vary according to their objectives, needs and roles.

Their questions should be answered during the briefing wherever possible. If not, answers should be circulated with the minutes at the end of each cycle.

Questions arising from the first level briefings will help to tailor the second level briefings by highlighting areas of interest and concern in that particular department, and so on down the line.

- By the time of the second level briefings, the material will be tailored to each department and may look slightly different for each area. All the questions, views and information gathered should be fed back to HR so that it can be collated and key issues identified and suitable responses prepared.
• A simple one-page overview at the end of each cycle - drawn from minutes of all the meetings by a team brief administrator - will highlight cross-functional issues and concerns to be answered. These issues may also contribute to the agenda for subsequent senior management meetings.
• Feedback will only be forthcoming on a regular basis if people know it will be used and addressed. By building credibility and trust in the process, teams will remain interested and participative. Therefore, managers must keep to schedules and be seen to be responding to feedback, giving progress reports and revising objectives as relevant.

The Team Briefing Process

Each main area should establish a briefing structure so that everyone knows who briefs who. Wherever possible the briefing structure should mirror the management structures. The briefing structure should enable the core brief to be cascaded rapidly through the organisation.

The ideal group size for team briefings is between four and fifteen. As the group grows larger, the meetings become more difficult logistically, and individuals also become more reluctant to ask questions.

Team briefings should ideally take place on the same day, and preferably at the same time.

Briefings should be concise, lasting no more than 20 or 30 minutes. All briefers should be trained to create and present local briefs, and to facilitate briefing sessions.

Team briefings should be based on the briefing or bulletin from the top of the organisation so that all employees have access to the same information. The message from the top remains consistent to all audiences and has not been watered down or become garbled.

The team brief can then deal with the issues raised in the bulletin, looking at them from a strategic and local level as they apply to that particular team.

Arranging your team briefings

Timing

First of all make yourself familiar with the Team Briefing Schedule and agree with your line manager when you will be expected to deliver your brief to your team to ensure the correct cascade mechanism is in place.

Once the cascade has been agreed you should set a date/set dates for your briefings. When choosing dates you should try to aim for a time when most of your team is around – take into consideration those who may work part-time or shifts/rotas.

Size
The ideal team briefing is made up of around 4-15 people. If you are responsible for large numbers of staff then it may make sense to identify supervisors/managers/deputies within your team who could deliver team briefings to smaller groups of staff. If you are in doubt about the best way to approach this then speak to your line manager for guidance.

Venue
Make sure you choose a suitable venue for your team briefing. Take into consideration the number of people who will be involved in the briefing and any access requirements your staff may have.

Publicising the briefings
Once you’ve got the arrangements in place make sure that you give your team enough notice so that they are able to attend. Make sure everyone knows where the venue is.

The Agenda

As with all meetings, it is best to put in some preparation beforehand. This might mean writing yourself an agenda so that you know which items you’ll be talking about. Remember you will be delivering your brief verbally so you want to sound natural – not scripted. You could try writing headings and elaborating with a few key points under each heading – just to remind you what messages you want to get across.

Priorities
- Look at the brief through your staff’s eyes.
- Are there any logical links between the various items on the brief? If so, put the agenda into the order which suits this. This will help your delivery.
- Work out roughly how long each item should take and make a note of this on your agenda so that you can keep an eye on the time as you work through the briefing. Remember to allow time for questions after each item.

Preparing the local Brief

The briefing you deliver to your staff should be made up of two elements – the information contained in the core brief and a local brief relevant to your own area of work.

The Core Brief

Your manager will tell you about the Core Brief which will contain items which may be of operational or strategic importance to the organisation as a whole.

You should deliver the information to your team as part of your team briefing. Where possible you should try to make the information contained within the Core Brief as relevant to your team as possible.

Context
Briefers must always remember, and if necessary remind those that they are briefing, that the object of the exercise is to provide information. Briefings are not designed for consultation or negotiation.

Anticipating Questions

Remember that your team brief is as much an opportunity for your team to ask questions as it is for you to give them information. When you’ve decided upon your list of items try to think about the kind of questions your team could ask. Put yourself in their shoes and try to anticipate their concerns. This will help you to prepare your answers in advance.

Presenting the Brief

Remember that you will be presenting your brief face-to-face, so you should give some thought to how you come across to your team. Briefings should be fairly informal and by all means adopt an approach which best suits the culture and nature of your team. Even though you have put some thought and effort into preparing your briefing, try not to script what you want to say – it will just come across as unnatural and you may be thrown off course if someone asks a question!

What you should do is make sure that the style of your briefings is pretty consistent so that staff come to know what to expect and what their role is in the briefing.

A typical briefing might look like this:

- Announce the beginning of the briefing
- Note taken of any absentees
- The briefing goes through the items on the brief – both Core and local
- Questions arising out of the brief are asked and answered
- The briefer refers to any significant anticipated questions that have not been asked
- Make a note of questions raised which you haven’t been able to answer
- Remind the group of the date of the next briefing
Points about presentation style

Remember that you are not addressing the United Nations! This is your own team so the briefing should be relaxed and reasonable informal.

Try to be:

Clear – avoid unfamiliar technicalities, acronyms, names

Brief – don’t ramble, sometimes you should repeat the message to make sure it sinks in, but do it concisely

Interesting – be interested! Use examples that the group will recognise

In control – arrange the group so that you are its focus. Watch the reaction you are getting as you go along.

Positive – watch out for the habit of excessive apologising. It makes you appear nervous and can give your staff the impression that you don’t really agree with decisions which have been made at a higher level. Remember that as a manager it is your responsibility to communicate decisions to your team regardless of your own personal views, so don’t try to distance yourself from the brief. Wherever possible arm yourself with the reasons which lie behind the information you are giving out.

Feedback and Follow Up

As soon as you have completed the briefing there are some simple, but vital steps which you must take with regards to feedback and follow up. These include:

Record of notes – if you have taken any notes during the briefing then file them appropriately. This may help you when you come to prepare your next briefing.

What to do with feedback - make a note of the questions/ideas which came up at the meeting. This is particularly important if you were asked a question and couldn’t provide a full answer at the time. Make a record of these questions and ensure you follow them up and get back to the team. You should try to get back to your team with an answer within 5 working days of the briefing taking place. If your team briefings are to work successfully it’s essential that you get back to your team with answers to their questions, otherwise they may start to lose faith in the whole process.

Inform your line manager – It’s important that you give feedback you receive to your line manager so that they can feed any points they feel are relevant back up the management chain to senior levels if appropriate. It’s worth getting into the habit of using the feedback form (attached) to produce a short outline of any feedback which you can then deliver to your line manager soon after the briefing so that information is fresh in your mind. You can also share with your manager how you felt the briefing went and what the level of interest was.
Make sure you do your follow up quickly – if you do this simple follow up within an hour or two of the briefing it will take you perhaps ten minutes. If you leave it a week the chances are you won't be able to do it at all!
FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

How often should I hold team briefings?

Team briefings need to be held on a planned and regular basis. If you are a manager who will be delivering a briefing make sure you are aware of the Team Briefing Schedule and plan your team briefings around this, in discussion with your line manager and fellow managers.

How long should my team briefing last?

Your briefing should last around 30 minutes. If there isn’t much information to impart then don’t waffle – just reduce the length of the team briefing. Make sure you leave enough time for staff to ask questions – this is a two-way form of communication.

How many people should there be in a team briefing?

Ideally between 4-15 people. If you are part of a very large team you may need to look at how you structure team briefings. Perhaps you can delegate responsibility to deputies/supervisors who could deliver a brief to a smaller group of team members? Discuss with your line manager if you’re in any doubt.

My team is geographically disbursed and it would be hard to get them together for a 30 minute meeting. What should I do?

Even though staff are geographically dispersed it’s still likely that you will meet with them at least once a month for a team or operational meeting. If this is the case you could try carrying out the team briefing at the same time i.e. before your operational meeting. You should make sure you make the distinction between the two so that attendees are clear what is going on. You should endeavour to ensure that the team briefing takes place within the timescale outlined in your team briefing schedule.

I am responsible for front line staff and I can’t just shut down essential services to call a team briefing meeting. What should I do?

Try to arrange your team briefing at a time when the majority of your team can attend. If, however, there are members of the team who can’t leave their post you could look into arranging cover for half an hour so that they can attend. If this is not possible, you may have to brief these members of staff separately.

What should I do about briefing absentees?

You should make sure that those who are unable to attend the briefing still receive the information which was discussed and are given the opportunity to contribute or ask questions. This may mean that you have to speak to them individually when they are back at work. You should try to do this as soon as they are available so that the briefing cascade is complete.

What should I do with the feedback I receive?
With any luck your team will give you some useful feedback and make some valid suggestions during the briefing. It’s really important that you do something constructive with this feedback – your team will quickly tire of the system if they feel that their views are not being taken seriously. Use the feedback form provided and give it to your line manager so that it can be fed higher up the management structure if this is appropriate.

I’m not very confident doing face-to-face briefings – can I get some training?

ODTD is offering some short workshops on team briefings. Contact Helen Vaughan on 6298 or at h.vaughan@mmu.ac.uk for more details.
TEAM BRIEFING - RECORDING FEEDBACK

Briefing Team:

Date of Briefing:
Prepared by:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unanswered questions from this brief:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Remember it is your responsibility to report back answers to these questions. Questions should be answered within 5 working days.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item of most interest:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive suggestions made:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What the team want to know about in future briefs:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>