Debriefing: Building Staff Capacity

Background
Dr Debbie Hawker’s “Debriefing Aid Workers and Missionaries: A Comprehensive Manual” gives thorough guidelines for those who debrief relief and development workers, volunteers, missionaries, peacekeepers or those in similar positions. The majority of aid workers report that receiving a personal debriefing session upon their return home has a positive psychological effect on them.

To discuss Hawker’s manual and share experiences and knowledge of the debriefing process, People In Aid offered a Masterclass in September 2011 to those who had completed a previous debriefing workshop in June. This Masterclass was highly successful, with participants presenting complex situations and finding satisfactory solutions through collaboration.

Context
Throughout the Masterclass, many participants expressed concerns about how limited staff capacity negatively affected their debriefing sessions. The explanations were varied – sometimes the debriefers were not as experienced or trained as they could have been, and sometimes they did not have enough time to go into detail with the individual.

Analysis of the problem
Debbie Hawker recommends that personal debriefing usually takes around two hours. A number of the participants questioned how, with limited staff capacity, one can spend this long with each individual. Many felt that in their organisation debriefing had simply become a “tick box” to be checked, and that they did not have the time to go into detail and address each individual’s experience. In addition, limited time imposed inhibitions on individuals, preventing them from fully opening up and sharing their thoughts thus rendering the session redundant. One participant noted that “if an individual knows that they have to have everything together in half an hour, it’s very difficult for them to let go, onfront and relive the experience”.

But what if the individual is willing to open up and, within a time limit, the debriefer is unable to offer any sense of closure? Is it better to avoid opening up issues which the debriefer and their organisation do not have the capacity to deal with?
Solutions to the problem

Following a highly stimulating discussion, with a variety of viewpoints being expressed, the group came to the following conclusions with regards to staff capacity:

- The most important aspect is to give people the necessary time they need. Research indicates that debriefing sessions are more likely to have a positive effect if they last for at least one hour. Giving up this amount of time is often difficult. One solution might be to offer a group debriefing to a number of returnees. Even if they have been in different locations doing different jobs, they have a lot in common and can learn from and support each other. If one agency does not have enough returnees to form a group, it could be a multi-agency group. Individual sessions (or professional counselling) might be offered to anyone who needed them afterwards.

- If an hour is not available, it might be best not to formally call the session debriefing. Showing interest and listening could still be beneficial, even without time for a full debriefing.

- If you feel you should postpone a session due to lack of time, offering to rearrange the session at a more suitable time when both parties can spare the hours is a better option than cancelling altogether or trying to debrief in a few minutes.

- If it is difficult to arrange to debrief an individual in person, long distance debriefing becomes an option. Though not ideal, long distance debriefing can be of use in these situations as both parties can arrange, in advance, a mutually convenient time to discuss the issues for at least an hour.

- Don’t assume you will “open up a can of worms” that you won’t be able to close. Even if you, the debriefer, cannot help, recommend them to somebody who can. Help them identify ways to make themselves feel better – talking to a friend or family member, a past volunteer who has gone through similar experiences, or even recommending them to a counsellor if necessary. If you are aware of symptoms of PTSD or depression, always encourage them to talk to a doctor. Debriefing helps them find ways to deal with their feelings.

- Make sure that you have an appropriate person conducting the debriefing session. Try to match individuals with staff who have knowledge relevant to the experience. Sometimes debriefers feel as if they are unable to deal with the situation at hand, simply because their own experience and
training is not exactly matched to the given situation. Creating a pool of debriefers with different experiences and qualifications helps increase the options available, and increases the likelihood of there being a highly suitable debriefer available at any given time. One participant noted that:

“There is always a challenge with staff capacity and a question of who is most qualified to do the debriefing. A lot of people have the skills but haven’t gone through any formal training. For me it [the debriefing workshop] was an opportunity to say, ‘let’s look at the process of debriefing so that we are able to understand it better, and the people we support can get the best out of their debriefing experience’.

The use of an online mentoring system has been highly beneficial for one participant and their organisation. With this system, aid workers who have recently returned from their assignment are matched to previous employees who have gone through similar experiences. The positive effect this has is backed up by research; in a recent report, when asked the question “what would have helped you most upon your return?” 40% of debriefees stated that they wanted to share with people who had a similar experience.

Reflection
Debriefers can sometimes lack the time or training needed to give a thorough debriefing. There must come a point, where instead of targeting the effects that this has, we must look at the cause. Debriefing is part of a wider process, and if capacity is lacking in other areas, this may negatively affect debriefing process. The quality of selection, recruitment, briefing and ongoing care are equally important in supporting the individual throughout their assignment.

In examining the effectiveness of debriefing one must also examine the first two stages – Preparing and Supporting. “Debriefing does not work without trust and confidence and you gain this in the first two phases”, states one participant. “What I don’t believe is that we don’t have the resources or capacity for it. I hear that all the time. But our biggest investment is our staff.” If the tried and tested solutions do not work, it may be time to step back and examine all facets of the process in order to build up staff capacity for debriefing.

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1 Waitt, Catriona, *Survey of Returning Overseas Workers*, September 2011