

Team Briefing



This checklist is designed for organisations wishing to implement team briefing.

Team briefing originated in the 1960s when companies developed briefing groups which cascaded information through the organisation. The emphasis then switched to the department or work group, where "local" information of relevance to the immediate group was added to organisational messages and where information was encouraged to flow in all directions - down, up and sideways. It is important to view team briefing as one plank in the communications strategy of the organisation.

Definition

Team briefing is a process which involves managers and supervisors' talking to their teams about what is happening in the workplace. The basic principles are that it:

- ▼ is face-to-face
- ▼ takes place in small teams
- ▼ is led by the team leader
- ▼ happens on a regular basis
- ▼ includes both organisational and team information
- ▼ offers an opportunity to ask questions.

Advantages of team briefing

Team briefing:

- ▼ establishes a downward communication system
- ▼ improves upward communication
- ▼ ensures regular communication
- ▼ managers are kept in touch with their staff and developments throughout the organisation
- ▼ develops trust, cooperation and commitment
- ▼ helps people to deal with and accept change
- ▼ reduces the effectiveness, and probably the use, of the grapevine and prevents misunderstandings
- ▼ reinforces the role of the team leader.

Potential problems with team briefing

- ▼ It can become too rigid.
- ▼ It may be imposed from above.
- ▼ The system may be used simply to cascade information downwards.
- ▼ Communicators may not command sufficient respect from those whom they brief.
- ▼ There may be insufficient preparation.
- ▼ The information may not be made relevant to the audience.
- ▼ There may be a failure to answer or follow up questions.

Action checklist

1. Gain commitment from managers

Win the commitment of all supervisors and managers, as the system will succeed or fail on the attitudes of the briefers themselves. They need to believe in the effectiveness of the system, to have an understanding of its place in the overall organisational strategy, to acquire the skills necessary to help them run it and to win the respect of those whom they are briefing.

2. Consult employee representatives

Involve union and staff representatives from the beginning of the process. Discuss the purpose of team briefing, encourage them to participate in the design of the system and reassure them that it is not a mechanism for undermining union influence.

3. Appoint coordinators

Assign responsibility for the system to one or more coordinators, depending on the size of the organisation. These people should be highly regarded, know how the organisation operates and consequently be able to get things done. Their responsibilities include:

- ▼ planning and structuring the system
- ▼ training and briefing others
- ▼ ensuring consistency between briefings
- ▼ coordinating feedback
- ▼ monitoring progress.

4. Train the briefers

Organise training for all briefers, if not in team briefing specifically then at least in communications skills. Decide whether to adopt a "train the trainer" approach with only the core trainers (the coordinators) trained by outside bodies. Give additional training to the coordinators to enable them to run the system efficiently.

5. Overcome any logistical difficulties

Consider how you are going to run briefings where there is a continuous production line or where shiftworkers are employed. Remember that a willingness to cancel or postpone briefings when there are exceptionally busy periods or when members of staff are absent may be seen to undermine management's commitment to the process.

6. Devise a team briefing structure

Set out the frequency, length and style of briefing meetings and incorporate your decisions into a policy document for briefers. Design the documentation needed, including forms for briefers' notes, for staff feedback and for coordinators' monitoring of the process.

7. Establish guidelines for the content of briefings

Decide which subjects are suitable for briefings. The Work Foundation recommends reports covering the four Ps: Progress, Policy, People and Points for action. Start the system with a core brief, but as it is passed through the organisation aim to add items of local information. By the end, the core brief should account for no more than about 30% of the briefing.

8. Build team briefing into the organisational system

Integrate team briefing into the regular procedures of the organisation. Recognise team briefing as part of the supervisor's or manager's work and evaluate their performance in this as in any other area. Encourage good briefing behaviours and help unsatisfactory performers to improve.

9. Allow opportunities for questions

Ensure that time is allowed for questions during briefings and that those that cannot be answered on the spot are responded to within a guaranteed period.

10. Monitor progress

Check that information is getting to all levels of the organisation and that it is understood. Ways of doing this include:

- ▼ the appointment of coordinators
- ▼ managers' walkabouts when team briefing is taking place
- ▼ employee attitude surveys
- ▼ feedback forms
- ▼ audits by outside bodies.

Decide how you are going to measure the effectiveness of team briefing, particularly when it is merely one plank in a communications strategy.

Dos and don'ts for team briefing

Do

- ▼ Ensure there is management commitment at all levels.
- ▼ Focus on positive issues and avoid merely highlighting problems.
- ▼ Keep the paperwork to a minimum.

Don't

- ▼ Confuse team briefing with other processes.
- ▼ Allow briefing sessions to develop into lengthy problem-solving workshops or an alternative to other team meetings.
- ▼ Impose an off-the-shelf system without tailoring it to suit your organisation's specific needs.
- ▼ Launch team briefing without planning it carefully.
- ▼ Assume that only new information is appropriate or worth disseminating; frequently it is important to update earlier messages.

Useful reading

Books

Guide to internal communication methods, Eileen Scholes ed
Aldershot: Gower, 1999

How to give effective business briefings, Colin Clark
London: Kogan Page, 1999

The team briefing information pack
London: Industrial Society, 1996

Useful addresses

The Work Foundation, Peter Runge House, 3 Carlton House Terrace, London SW1Y 5DG
Tel: 0870 165 6700, www.theworkfoundation.com

Thought starters

- ▼ Is there ever confusion about issues which management thought had been clarified?
- ▼ How much do departments know about each other's work and about organisational objectives?
- ▼ How much support is given to supervisors' and managers' efforts to keep their teams informed?
- ▼ What are the components of your organisation's communications strategy?

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