



## **Leadership Letter** *Had a debrief lately?*

I was talking with a guy recently who shared with me that he felt a lack of passion and energy for life. He had been in some difficult family and ministry situations and had a feeling of disappointment with the way things had turned out. I asked him he had talked to anyone and he said that he had received some prayer but still felt the same way. I meet people often who have been through all kinds of tough times and yet have not been able to spend time reflecting and talking it through with someone. Debriefing is so vital in situations like this. We all need it and so this letter is dedicated to the topic.

**So what is debriefing?** Debriefing was initiated by the military, where a soldier or pilot was questioned about a completed mission or undertaking. The purpose of this was to obtain intelligence and then to instruct the individual as to what information could be released to the public and what information was restricted. Another purpose was to assess the individual and return him or her to regular duties as soon as possible.

Debriefing has developed over recent years to include the reflection and evaluation of all aspects of personal life, relationships and the work place. The main purpose is to learn from your experiences, good or bad, and grow through them. Debriefing is also helpful in extraordinary situations of transition, crisis intervention and trauma. The main purpose here is to reduce psychological harm and bring closure to events and open issues.

So the first question for you to consider is this: *When was the last time you had a debrief for your job, your marriage or family, your friendships, your leadership style or events you have led or been a part of?*

In order to experience a positive debriefing, you will need a few ingredients: some quality time, a safe place where you won't be disturbed, a clear agenda of what you want to debrief, the time frame involved, and good questions to help you gain the most from the experience.

During more regular daily life you can be involved in debriefing yourself. I engage in personal debriefing all the time and find it extremely helpful. At the end of a day, after speaking in a seminar or when guests leave I often ask myself questions on how I felt it went and how it could have been improved. If you journal and use your time to reflect and process your problems, decisions, plans, joys and grief then you are already debriefing on a personal basis.

However, there are many situations, especially where there are a lot of emotions surfacing, when there is the possibility of blind spots, or a lack of objectivity, where it's better to involve a person trained in debriefing. This person will keep you on track and enable you to draw out your insights, encourage you along the way with the right action points and provide some accountability. Much can be accomplished in debriefing, simply through the person verbalising their experience and their feelings. So key qualities for the debriefer are listening and paraphrasing skills.

Some situations lend themselves to group debriefing. For instance coming back from a team outreach, an event where a number of people were working together or a couple or family debriefing a period of time, a difficulty or an event.

**What outcomes are we expecting from a debriefing time?**

1. **To provide an opportunity for thankfulness to God.** God gave us an example in Genesis of looking back on his creative work and taking time to evaluate it and celebrate it. Each day God reflected and said, "It is good." Let's avoid the urgency trap and take time to enjoy each success or even failure, to appreciate what the Lord has done, and allow our positive emotions to rise to the surface and be shared through the telling of stories, through prayer, worship, journaling, and in all kinds of creative expression.
2. **Bring closure to the past in order to move on.** Open issues from the past can be like sores that don't heal. Sometimes it's as simple as going back to say a proper goodbye and settle something emotionally in your heart. I was recently working with a group and revisiting the past four years and helping them to identify open issues that needed to be processed.

Here is a list of possibilities:

- a. Checking that all work commitments are completed
  - b. Facing unmet expectations or disappointments
  - c. Making important statements or affirmations that were unspoken or forgotten
  - d. Releasing forgiveness and bringing reconciliation where necessary and possible
  - e. Ensuring spiritual cleansing of the group or location
  - f. Saying good-bye and bringing closure to those you have been working with
  - g. Laying down burdens that have been carried for the vision and for individuals
3. **Maximise the learning potential of the event.** Sadly many of our experiences are wasted. So often when something goes well, we are pleased, relieved and grateful and move on to the next thing. Then when something doesn't go well, we try to forget about it and again move on as quickly as possible. Actually the greatest lessons are so often to be learned through the tough times. We all know that, but we still need to be intentional and take the time to process and mine the gold nuggets from every experience, good and bad. We can ask ourselves questions like, "What went well and why? What went wrong and why? How could it be improved? How was I encouraged, challenged or disappointed?" These and a thousand other questions can be asked to draw out the maximum learning.
  4. **Moving forward and applying the learning to your life.** Consider the lessons that can be learned from the experience – the issues to be addressed in one's life, the skills and character to be developed, the principles to put into practice, etc. We now have to ask the question, "So what?" What am I going to do with the knowledge that I have just gained? How am I to apply this knowledge? At this point we have to turn information into goals for action. These goals should be SMART – specific, measureable, attainable, relevant, and time oriented. Under the attainable question, it's important to take into account your energy level and emotional health right now, especially if you have been through a draining time. There may be a time gap before you are able to implement new goals into your life.
  5. **Evaluation of the achievement of goals and the overall effectiveness.** How often have you been asked about an activity you have been involved in, "So, how was it, how did you do?" Usually our answer is, "Great, fine, good time...." If we did just a little debrief we could answer more specifically. How did we meet the goals? How effective were we as a team? What kind of progress was made? A debrief is to enable us to measure our effectiveness, identify where we were strong and where we were weak and think through how to improve the next time. This activity enables us to see how our leadership can be developed.

## **When, where and why should debriefing take place?**

- 1. At regular routine times in your workplace.** A few years ago I spent a couple of hours with a leader who hadn't received debriefing in 20 years of ministry. There had been no evaluation of how he was doing in his leadership role, no clarity of how he had grown or developed as a leader, no feedback or idea if he was even suited to the job. He had soldiered on in a very difficult place, working with very strong opinionated leaders. He was able to see more clearly for the future having had this important time of debriefing. Since then, I have recognised the need of regular debriefing for our leadership roles. When someone transitions into a role, it is important to have a three-month debrief in order to discover how they are adapting, what is going well and what they are finding difficult and if they are suited for the job. After the initial three months, follow it up with a yearly debrief or evaluation and then a major one at five years. These debriefing times are vital for our leadership development.
- 2. After an event, teaching, school or seminar.** It's so easy to be in task mode in missions where one event or training time goes straight into the next. In the past, I am sorry to say that often I didn't make time for proper evaluations. How often have you sat in a seminar and come away with the sense that it was a great time. The obvious question is, "Why was it good? What made it good?" Just a few minutes of debriefing will enable those questions to be answered. It can be useful to use creative ways of debriefing so that we don't get into a rut of just asking simple questions. Utilise the right brain thinking! For instance, get the group to split into threes and come up with a simple drama of one of the highlights, or put a whole load of words and phrases on the table and ask people to pick up one that relates to them in what they have learned. Just a little creativity here will have great results of helping students remember the content and specifically the highlight from the session for them personally.
- 3. After a season of time in a relationship.** There is a myth that says "a good relationship means you don't have to work at it!" All relationships, especially the really intimate ones take a lot of energy, time and creativity. If we want to be intentional in our growth with others then debriefing is vital. Rite and I have sought out seminars, books and retreats for our marriage each year for the past 33 years of married life. Those times provide good debriefing on where are we at, and encourage us to set new goals for growth. This is important in team life, in friendships and families. I would encourage you to do something like this at least once a year.
- 4. During or after a transition in your role or relationships.** In my experience transitions generally take much longer that I expect them to. Our emotions tend to take longer to adjust than our thinking patterns. No matter how big or small the transition, take the time to process it.
- 5. After you move to another nation or come home from a time away.** It is often a surprise to experience reverse culture shock for the first time. We expect the shock entering a totally different culture, but not going back to our own after a season! I remember coming to Spain six years ago and thinking that it would just take a few months and I would be through the transition. However, it has taken years and it's still not complete.
- 6. After a critical incidence or high stress situation.** The timing is very important. Too soon and your emotions are still too high or you are too stressed to really benefit anything from the debriefing. If you wait too long you can lose the details, feelings and relevance

and be affected in a negative way for a long time. So make sure you receive debriefing sooner rather than later. If there is a situation that is just sitting in your heart that you do figures of eight around, then take some action to sort it out!

**7. At strategic times of the year.** For me personally, the new year creates an ideal opportunity of going through a personal debriefing of my life. For you it may be at the end of the academic year in the summer. This debrief can include aspects of work, church, hobbies, social life, spouse, kids, parents and personal life (physical health & fitness, emotional life, spiritual life, intellectual life, personal finances and life purpose and calling.)

### **Here are four tools to help in the debriefing process.**

**1. Past, present, future.** A number of people in their nineties filled out a survey asking them what they would change if they could live life over again. The three top answers were:

- a. Reflect more (past)
- b. Take more risks (present)
- c. Give myself to something that would outlive my life (future)

One of the first things we do in the LDC is to have a debriefing of the last season of ministry with this framework of past, present and future. We start by looking at the past and identify the positive and negative experiences. Then move to the present and see if there are outstanding issues that are current. Then look into the future and ask: "Where do we go from here?" If you need a copy of the outline, let me know and I will send it to you.

**2. My dashboard.** Wayne Cordeiro shares a helpful tool in his book *Leading on empty*. He explains that on his dashboard are twelve dials that meter vital systems essential to his health and success. Everyone will have their own unique dials that they want to monitor. His dials include: Faith life, marriage life, family life, office life, computer life, ministry life, financial life, social life, attitudinal life, author's life, speaker's life and physical life. He monitors those dials on a regular basis which becomes his personal debrief and keeps his life in balance.

**3. Roles & Goals.** Those who have been through an LDC will remember this teaching well. You start by writing down your personal roles (spirit, soul & body), relational roles (eg husband, father, brother, son, friend...) and ministry roles (eg For me: YWAM Europe chairman, LDC international, Leadership retreat centre...) Long term and short term goals are set for each role. Then short term goals are reassessed season by season. I personally like to evaluate every 3 months.

**4. Timeline.** Think over the last season of time, eg. 3, 6 or 12 months (or longer if needed) in a certain category of your life. For instance you can analyse your job role or marriage or personal walk with the Lord. Draw a horizontal line across the page representing the time period. The vertical axis is for highs and lows or positive energy and draining experiences. Think through the time period and put crosses and a simple explanation where you have had positive and negative experiences. Then process these experiences for growth and development.

I encourage you to take some quality time at the beginning of this new year to have a debriefing in one or all of the categories of your life. Take the encouragement of the over nineties and reflect and make every experience you have had produce fruit.

Happy new year.

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P.S. In certain cases (bigger transitions, crises, wanting to debrief a longer phase of ministry), it may be helpful to have someone else do the debriefing with you. At Elijah's Inn, as part of the Leadership Retreat Centre, Franziska and Wilrens Hornstra offer the possibility of personal retreats with a formal debriefing option. Contact us if you are interested or [visit their website](#).