BASICS OF DEBRIEFING
By Andrea Corney
Stanford Graduate School of Business

People don’t learn from experience; they learn from reflecting on their experience.
-- Sivasailam Thiagarajan

Experiential Learning Cycle
Experiential learning has several theoretical underpinnings, most notably the work of Kurt Lewin and David Kolb. Kolb proposed an “experiential learning cycle” consisting of 4 stages (see Figure 1 below). Subsequent writers have described the cycle with different labels, but all of these models are based on the same underlying concepts. They describe the process by which individuals make meaning of their experience and translate that into new behaviors.

This model is the basis for the design of the Leadership Labs. We start with some kind of activity such as Desert Survival, a case role-play, or working on a group project. We reflect on what happened through the use of debriefing questions, feedback, watching a video, or simple self-reflection. We conceptualize by developing general hypotheses or principles based on what just happened. And finally, we test out those hypotheses by trying new behavior in future Labs or in other parts of our lives.

Figure 1: Kolb Experiential Learning Cycle with Leadership Labs Debriefing Questions
Debriefing as a Key Tool for Experiential Learning

Our days are filled with actions – the first phase of the experiential learning cycle. Most of the time we stop there. It takes all 4 phases of the cycle to extract learning that lasts from our experience. While individual reflection is useful, a conversation with one or more others is usually the most effective way to move ourselves and others through the cycle. These conversations can happen at an individual level, such as a 1:1 coaching session, or at a group level, as in the context of a team coaching session. This kind of conversation is referred to here as “debriefing”. Debriefing is driven by a series of questions that drive participants to reflect their way through the experiential learning cycle. The case or activity is just a tool for generating the necessary data for the real learning, which happens in the debrief.

A debriefing discussion is critical in helping participants reflect on their experiences, relate them to the real world, discover useful insights, and share them with each other. Debriefing also helps you to wind down the learning activity, reduce negative reactions among the participants, and increase insights.

In the Leadership Labs you will often end an activity with a debriefing discussion, which you will take turns leading. The purpose of this article is to help you think about how you want to lead the debrief when it is your turn.

Debriefing Dilemmas

One dilemma in debriefing is maintaining a balance between structure and free flow. Our experience is that it helps to have a few questions prepared in advance, while also being prepared to adapt to what happens in the activity and in the energy of the participants.

Another dilemma is time. In the Leadership Labs you will often have a tight timeframe for debriefing an activity. Often you will only have time for one or two questions and you will have to use your own judgment about how to use the time. The suggestions in LeadLabs and in this article are meant to stimulate your own thinking about what your specific squad needs to get the most out of the activity. It will be up to you to decide what will best serve your squad. The model described below will help guide you as you adapt in the moment.

Debriefing Model for Leadership Labs

In the Leadership Labs we use a set of three questions as a framework for debriefing activities:

1. What happened?
2. What have I learned?
3. What will I do going forward?

The rest of this article takes a closer look at how this model can guide you through a debrief.

WHAT HAPPENED?
Reflection on what happened and how these events were experienced by different participants.

In many group activities we can get so caught up in the task that we aren’t even aware of what is actually said and done. Starting with questions that explore what happened can ground everyone in the details of the interaction. Just the realization that different people notice different aspects of an interaction can be a rich source of learning.
“What happened” includes not just who said and did what, but also the impact of those behaviors. The impact is often found most clearly in people’s feelings. Paying attention to your own feelings as well as the range of feelings evoked in others goes a long way towards understanding what is driving your group’s dynamic.

Sample Questions For “WHAT HAPPENED?”

Individual level:
- What happened?
- What did you notice about your role?
- What did you notice about what you said or did?
- What did you think about saying or doing, but held back on?
- How did you feel?
- What did you notice about what others did or said?
- What was most memorable / different / interesting?
- At what points did you feel most and least involved?

Group level:
- What did the group do well to achieve the goal?
- What didn’t work as well?
- What were the turning points or critical moments?
- How did the group operate? (Did members take time to plan, assign roles, and apply midpoint correction?)
- How did the group make decisions?
- What happened in the communication and coordination within the team?

Other ways to reflect on what happened include watching a video of the event and exchanging feedback (“Ask Questions, Describe Behavior, Share Impact”).

WHAT HAVE I LEARNED?
Conceptualization of the learning and lessons taken from the activity.

Once we have a better understanding of what happened, we are ready to start making meaning out of the events. We can explore the implicit mental models that were driving participant behavior, we can start to form hypotheses about the conditions under which certain behaviors lead to certain outcomes, and we can articulate principles of individual and group dynamics.

This phase can include comparing this experience to participant’s own past work place experiences, as well as exploring how different behaviors might have impacted the outcome.

Sample Questions For “WHAT DID I LEARN?”

Individual
- What did you learn about yourself? About how you work with teams?
- How effective were you in the group?
- What motivated you to make the choices you did?
- What would you do differently in a “do-over”? Why? What prevented you from doing it in the first place?
- What is helping or hindering your learning?
Sample Questions For “WHAT DID I LEARN?”, cont’d

Group
- Who was influential in the group? Why? What did they do or say?
- What other factors contribute to positive influence in this group?
- What were your greatest challenges in this activity? Why?
- What meaning do you make of what occurred? Or what have you learned about yourself and teaming from this exercise?
- What was most / least valuable?
- What did you appreciate about others?

WHAT WILL I DO GOING FORWARD?
Options for applying and testing the learning discussed in the previous phases of debriefing.

Learning sticks when it is quickly put into practice. Use this phase to encourage participants to set specific plans for applying the learning. This could include what they want to focus on in the next Lab or other parts of their lives, how they will work on their learning goals, or even how this experience has changed their learning goals.

One useful approach is to think through options of how they might behave differently if the exercise were to be repeated.

Sample Questions For “WHAT WILL I DO GOING FORWARD?”
- Based on this learning, what should you / the team change going forward?
- How can you / the team apply the learning in the future?
- What is the insight / take away that you want to remember going forward?
- What new possibilities and choices can you see now?
- What do you want to explore further?

Why Don’t You Just Tell Us the Right Way to do it?
While it might be easier to just provide answers, they wouldn’t necessarily be the right answers for you. What works for one person in a given situation, won’t necessarily work for someone else or in a different situation. You need to discover what works for YOU, not what works for most people most of the time. The only way to discover what works for you is to actually try things out and then assess the impact of those behaviors. We can’t really trust that something does or does not work until we actually do it, reflect on how it felt, and get feedback from others on how we impacted them. Even if “right” answers existed, just telling people what works rarely results in actual behavior change. While it might be somewhat helpful to read about how to ride a bike, the only way to really learn and get good at it is to do it.

Beyond the Leadership Labs
The skill of learning from experience is the gift that keeps on giving. Your time at the GSB will be filled with opportunities to learn and grow – study groups, clubs, trip leadership, building your network, job hunting, and simply choosing how to use your time in a setting that provides too many choices. Knowing how to get from experience to real learning will enrich your time at the GSB. Think of it as doubling the return on your investment of time and tuition.
Beyond the Leadership Labs, cont’d

Beyond the GSB many of you will find yourself in leadership roles in which part of your success will depend on your ability to help your team learn rapidly. Picture a weekly sales meeting with a team that is rolling out a new product and needs to quickly figure out the most effective sales approach. Instead of grilling the team on the size of their funnel and hoping to motivate through fear or embarrassment, you could focus the team on learning by leading a discussion with the following questions:

1. What did we try this week and what happened as a result of what we tried?
2. What have we learned from what happened?
3. What will we try next week?

Whether entering new markets, developing new products, or improving processes, you will find that debriefing skills are a critical part of your leadership toolkit.

Resources


http://www.thiagi.com/pfp/1E4H/february2004.html#Debriefing