



mhca's e-Newsletter

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## Debriefing is a Teaching & Learning Opportunity

*A Guest Article from Founder & CEO of Strategic Leadership Consultants LLC Patrick Houlahan*

Everything was and is important at TOPGUN. How you prepared for a flight, how you delivered the brief, what you did airborne, and how you uncovered the root causes, lessons learned, and best practices in the Debrief. Everything is critically important and scrutinized. However, it was the debrief and the debrief process that was paramount (second only to safety of course.)

I learned a ton in the lectures, simulators, briefs, and flights, but nothing could replace the debrief. At TOPGUN and throughout all Naval Aviation, the debrief is a teaching and learning opportunity. It is **never** punitive. Allow me to say that again; A debrief isn't and should never be punitive.

We all make mistakes and we all do things right. What was refreshing about a TOPGUN led debrief is the goods were highlighted as well as the others. In fact, the very language they used changed the dynamics of the debriefs. Wins, or doing things correctly, were "goods." Losses or mistakes were "others." Thus, we debriefed "goods and others." Why? Because you can learn from both. Calling something a "mistake" already sets a negative connotation on the experience and the debrief. By using "goods and others," the TOPGUN instructors made space for mistakes and failures without crushing a person's self-esteem and confidence.

So, how can you master the “Art of the Debrief?” How can you incorporate a Debrief process and Debrief culture into your team and organization? The application takes guidance, practice, and time. However, all you need to know is how to spell DEBRIEF to get started.

**D- Decide.** Make the commitment. Put it on the calendar. Don’t wait for something to go wrong. Hold debriefs at logical points in your operating cycle. Don’t wait for a “Post Mortem.”

**E- Environment.** It has to be safe, honest, and open. On every flight the TOPGUN IP started with their mistakes first and asked for feedback to level the playing field. Leaders, you must do the same.

**B- Brief Results.** If you have properly developed goals (I like to use the SMART format), then this is a YES or No question. Did we achieve X, yes or no? Then quickly brief WHAT happened.

**R- Root Cause.** Now you get into the meat of the debrief. Here you must ask WHY something happened at least three to five times. Any less and you are simply doing a review.

**I- Identify Best Practices.** What were our goods and others and what can we do differently to either repeat the goods or negate the others?

**E- Execute Best Practices.** There is nothing worse than coming up with great ideas after an experience and then leaving those ideas in a room. Execute the Best Practices! Share them throughout the organization.

**F- Follow-up.** As a leader, follow-up to ensure the changes are being implemented and follow-up with the health of your team. Sometimes debriefs can be uncomfortable. Make sure you thank your team for their time and send them out the door with their heads held high.

TOPGUN is an amazing school and taught me how to win in the air. But the ancillary lessons, like how to debrief and how to apply that outside of a flight, were the most valuable lessons I learned. Debriefing is a game changer and it doesn’t matter the size of your organization or how many clients you serve. If you and your team can create the right culture and master the art of the Debrief, you’ll be on your way to executing at the level of a TOPGUN fighter pilot.

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*Patrick Houlahan is a world-renowned speaker, teacher, leader, and Founder / CEO of Strategic Leadership Consultants LLC. Patrick provides leadership guidance and business strategies to organizations nationwide. His invigorating sessions at our [Spring Conference in Milwaukee](#) were video recorded so mhca members can watch them and share them with the rest of their teams.*



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