

**DEBRIEFING: THE KEY TO EFFECTIVE EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING**

Phillip L. Hunsaker, University of San Diego

An experiential leaning exercise may be defined as a task designed to generate behavior which can be analyzed with respect to specific theories and goal accomplishment. The objectives for participants in such experiences include increasing (1) understanding of principles and theories as applied to concrete situations, including transfer to outside situations, (2) skills in certain interpersonal and decision making methods, (3) skills in observing and diagnosing behavioral phenomena, and (4) awareness of their own values, assumptions, and interpersonal strengths and weaknesses.

Although opportunities exist for accomplishing all of the above objectives, participating in an experiential exercise does not guarantee that any learning at all will occur. Participants often become so involved, or have such a good time, that they fail to observe the lessons that could have been leaned. A similar outcome can occur when objectives and guides to leaning are unclear, or insufficient time is allowed for processing what happened during the exercise. The major opportunity for learning occurs through careful reflection and processing of the experiences as related to specific concepts and situations. In other words, all four phases of the leaning loop must be completed, i.e., the (1) experiences must he followed by a debriefing where participants (2) reflect and analyze what they did and felt, with respect to (3) existing concepts and new generalizations, so that they can (4) develop hypotheses to be tested in future experiences. Some ideas on how the facilitator can enhance this learning loop via the debriefing, are presented below.

**THE FACILITATOR'S RESPONSIBILITIES IN DEBRIEFING**

The main function of the facilitator during the debriefing is to insure an integration of the experiences with concepts and applications to outside situations so that appropriate generalizations can he made. It is also important that the facilitator encourage participants to exchange feedback and clarify strengths and weaknesses in their interpersonal behavior. Consequently, the facilitator should direct attention to both the content and process of the exercise with respect to both conceptual and personal learnings.

The chances for participants to benefit from debriefing activities in both areas, are increased if the facilitator: (1) Develops a secure and supportive leaning climate where participants adhere to norms of mutual help and reciprocal growth. Key ways for the facilitator to promote such a climate are through serving as a model, and by reinforcing desired behaviors; (2) Acts as a resource person in relating the experiences to concepts and specific problem situations (i.e., insuring problem-centered and theory-based learning); (3) Encourage high levels of participant contribution with respect to their own reactions and feedback for other participants (i.e., making it an active versus passive process with shared responsibility); (4) Provide adequate time to allow for personal, group, and content material to be processed and integrated.

**CONTENT DEBRIEFING**

The emphasis during content debriefing is on integrating the experiences with theory and research, and applying these leanings to specific organizational, or personal, situations. Guidelines for facilitating participant learning include: (1) Make sure participants are prepared to act in a “participant-observer” role; (2) Clarify objectives and relevant concepts to be kept in mind (if appropriate for the specific leaning experience) before the exercise begins; (3) Ask participants to write down some of their generalizations at the end of the exercise to share during the debriefing; (4) Provide a series of questions which require participants to relate their experiences to relevant concepts; (5) Elaborate on participant inputs where possible; (6) Provide a summary integration at the close of the session.

**INTERPERSONAL PROCESS DEBRIEFING**

The emphases during this portion of the debriefing are on inter-personal strengths and weaknesses and the group process. This is a high-risk learning compared to content applications, and special care must be exercised in maintaining a climate of psychological safety and mutual concern. Feedback should be solicited (for those who seek it) from as many participants as possible to increase its validity to the receiver. Because of his superior status, the facilitator should elaborate and clarify contributions of others where possible, adding his own insights only if others fail to state them earlier. Finally, participants should be well versed in the techniques of giving effective feedback (e.g., focusing feedback on: behavior versus what a person is, observations versus inferences, descriptions versus judgments, more or less versus either-or, specific “here and now” versus abstract “there and then,” alternatives versus advice, value to the receiver versus release to the provider, etc., etc.).

**CONCLUDING NOTE**

Since participants- share the responsibility in the debriefing and have many- different personal concerns, the facilitator should be prepared during both content and process debriefing to follow the direction which the participants are taking. One of the most exciting aspects of experiential learning is that unforeseen events, and new and different leanings, do occur. Adherence to a rigid structure may insure that certain content considerations are included, but it may also insure that many new and exciting leaning opportunities fail to be exploited. Maintaining this flexibility is a challenging, but rewarding opportunity.