

Ten questions that change a debrief

The activity is the delivery mechanism. **The debrief is the product.** One question per teamwork topic, the ten-minute structure they sit in, and the four rules that keep a room talking. Print this page and keep it in front of you.

~25%

Performance improvement from structured debriefs. The effect held for teams and for individuals, in simulated and real settings, in medical and non-medical work.

46 samples, 2,136 participants. Tannenbaum & Cerasoli (2013), *Human Factors* 55(1), 231–245.

	TOPIC	THE QUESTION THAT OPENS IT
1	Communication & information sharing	"Who knew something that would have helped someone else, and when did they find out?"
2	Asking for and offering help	"Did anyone need help and not ask? What stopped you?"
3	Monitoring & backup	"Did anyone notice someone else struggling? What did you do about it?"
4	Awareness of goals & priorities	"If I'd asked each of you separately what we were trying to achieve, would we have matched?"
5	Role clarity	"Was there a moment where two people were doing the same thing, or nobody was doing something?"
6	Preparation & planning	"How much did we plan before we started? Was that the right amount?"
7	Speaking up & challenging	"Did anyone think we were going wrong and not say so? What was the calculation?"
8	Managing conflict	"Where did we disagree, and what happened to the disagreement?"
9	Coordinating with outsiders	"Who outside this group affected this, and how well did we handle them?"
10	Sharing & allocating resources	"How did we decide who did what? Was it decided, or did it just happen?"

1 min

Set the stage

"A quick opportunity for learning and continuous improvement." Not a review. The framing decides what the room thinks is at stake.

7 min

Ask the team first

What happened, what went well, what was hard, what we would change. All of it before you say anything.

2 min

Add your observations

Only now. Never before. What you noticed that they did not mention — offered as observation, not verdict.

1 min

Summarize the actions

What was agreed, by whom, by when. Say it out loud so someone owns it.

TANNENBAUM'S FOUR RULES, VERBATIM

"Participants first, you second." · "Ask and pause. Let silence be your friend." · "What's right, not who is right. Avoid finger pointing or chastising." · "Be the navigator, not the driver... unless they aren't driving properly!"

Five questions that close a room down

Each one feels like a question and functions as a statement, an accusation, or a request for agreement. The rewrite asks the same thing without the trapdoor.

THE HABIT	WHAT IT SOUNDS LIKE	SAY THIS INSTEAD
1 • The leading question You have already decided the answer and you are collecting agreement.	"Don't you think it would have been better to plan that first?"	"How much did we plan before we started? Was that the right amount?"
2 • The blame question It names a person where it should name a behavior, and everyone adjusts what they are willing to say.	"Who dropped the ball on the handover?"	"What happened at the handover? What would have made it land?"
3 • The defensive 'why' "Why did you..." invites justification rather than reflection. The answer is a defense, not information.	"Why didn't you say something at the time?"	"What made it hard to say something at the time?"
4 • The compound question Two or three questions in one. People answer the easiest and the others are lost.	"How did that go, and was the timing right, and would you do it differently?"	"How did that go?" — then wait, then ask the next one.
5 • The closed question in disguise It looks open but has one acceptable answer, and the room can tell.	"Would everyone agree that communication was the main issue?"	"What was the main issue? Let's hear a few different views before we settle on one."

THE TEST

Before you ask a question, check: **could a reasonable person answer this in more than one way, and would you be genuinely interested in any of them?** If not, you are making a point rather than asking a question — which is sometimes the right thing to do, but you should know which one you are doing.

Where this came from

These ten questions are the opening question from each topic in **The Debrief Question Bank** — 160+ questions across the same ten topics, split into What? / So what? / Now what?, plus six-question rescue scripts for seven difficult rooms: silence, domination, politeness, blaming the absent, content drift, hybrid, and getting to a commitment that survives the parking lot.

It is file 03 of **The Corporate Team Building Bundle**, which also carries twenty activities, a facilitator manual and a session planner.

This sheet is free. Print it, copy it, hand it round your team, put it in your own training pack. No attribution needed, though we will not stop you.