



Improving Local Debriefing

Discussion paper for consultation



Improving Local Debriefing

Introduction

While both DSE and CFA have effective practices in place to manage formal high level debriefing, short falls have been identified in the current policy and debriefing practises in both DSE and CFA for local debriefing after incidents. This paper discusses the issues identified, and highlights the process and benefits of including After Action Reviews (AAR) into the CFA and DSE as part of the debrief process and more importantly common practice. The CFA/DSE Partnership Development Group has approved the distribution of this Discussion Paper.

Summary

This Discussion Paper is the second step towards the joint review of the debrief process. An Executive Summary was presented to the joint Partnership Development Group on the 26th of February and they accepted the progression of the project through the following path:

- Development of a discussion paper on debriefing incorporating the concept of After Action Reviews for broad circulation within both agencies by early April.
- A 3 month consultation period within both organisations to ensure the collective thinking is incorporated in the joint operating procedure.
- A determination of an agreed position following feedback by late July, development of an appropriate training package and joint operating procedure to be incorporated into the arrangements of both organisations.
- Roll-out the revised debrief process incorporating AAR process prior to the 2008/09 fire season.

Your feedback

Please read the attached discussion paper and provide feedback to:

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Closing date for feedback is 22 August, 2008.

Background

Current Debriefing Process

DSE and CFA have used debriefs after incidents for many years. These have generally been formal debriefs focused on specific incidents and have been run variably, with some open to all personnel who attend incidents, and others restricted to key players. According to the DSE Fire Management Manual 9.1: Recovery and the CFA Operations Checklist 2007-2008, the guidelines for current process articulate three types of debriefs that are used by both organisations, they are:

- State Debriefs – for larger incidents including fires that have generated firefighting safety concerns. Generally an independent facilitator who has not been directly involved with the incident should be engaged to avoid any confusion between the role as a facilitator and their participation in the debrief as part of the incident.
- Formal Debriefs – are a structured debrief that utilises the tools found in the Joint IMT Toolbox. Regional management are usually responsible for ensuring that the appropriate level of debriefs occur.
- Local Level Debriefs – this may range from a single brief, structured discussion between firefighters and their supervisors on completion of routine incident control operations, to a detailed debriefing following a major incident.

Furthermore, the Code of Practice for Fire Management on Public Land, Revision 1, February, 2006 commits DSE to:

Routine Debriefing

440 Each fire suppression event undertaken by the Department must, as a minimum requirement, be the subject of a debriefing. The style of debriefing may range from an informal discussion between firefighters and their supervisors on completion of routine fire control operations on a small wildfire to a formal debriefing as indicated below.

441 The purpose of debriefing must be to review firefighting and recovery operations (ie. Strengths and weaknesses, and if relevant, explanation of why environmentally preferred methods were not used) to identify where improvement is possible, and to reinforce a positive team-approach to fire suppression.

Formal Debriefing

442 The Department must conduct a formal debriefing and require a formal written report with findings where substantial resources were engaged, wildfire damage to assets or values was significant, safety was compromised, or recovery issues have been raised. The findings must be used to inform future pre-fire season briefings, fire operations and performance improvement.*

443 Where it appears necessary, the Department will support community debriefing to assist partner agencies with wider community recovery activities.*

444 The Department should make a general report available to the public at the end of each season.

Both agencies have agreed to the joint agency Partnership Guidelines and Incident Management Team Toolbox. These documents commit both agencies to the debriefing process and the toolbox outlines the format for major incident debriefs.

However these documents do not outline a formal process to debrief an individual crew, workgroup or station.

Current practise means that work unit debriefs are often informally conducted and the information is fed into the incident debrief for a resolution. The process is not guided by any agreed procedures, does not encourage self learning and allow the individual work units to develop solutions.

In recent years, the busy fire seasons 2002/03, 2005/06 and 2006/07 resulted in significant levels of debriefing at the IMT and regional levels. Given the extended state wide commitment, length of the season and complexities in Incident Management of the fires, there was a need to facilitate debriefs at many levels. These included functional roles, regional and incident specific debriefs. Due to the number of different debriefs, a state-wide, multi-agency summary was prepared for 2002/03 to capture the outcomes, while in 2005/06 and 2006/07 an external consultant was engaged in compiling a report of the seasons findings.

The level of debriefing depends on the nature of the fire suppression event. Complexity, duration, level and diversity of participants deployed, level of risk, health and safety issues all impact on the extent of the debriefing process. Figure 1¹ provides an overview of the current debriefing arrangements.

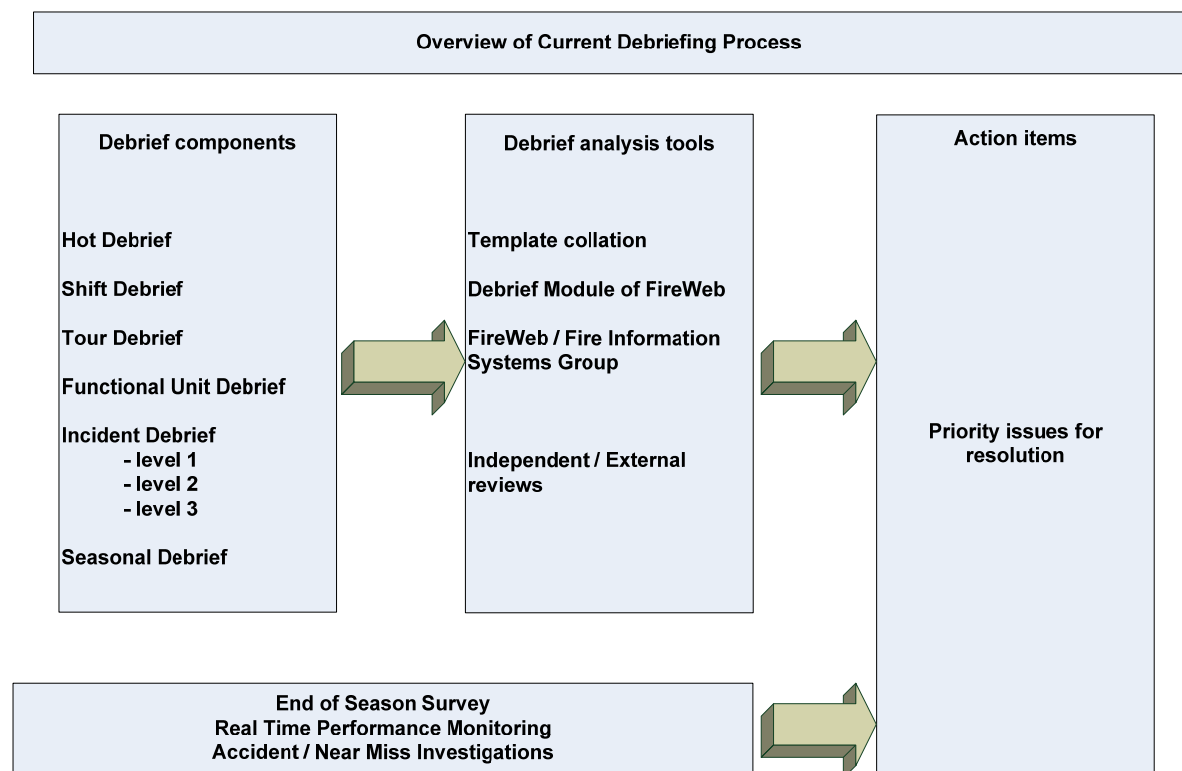


Figure 1.

¹ Hot Debrief: during an incident and following a significant OH&S or other event occurring.

Shift Debrief: at the conclusion of a shift.

Tour Debrief: at the conclusion of a tour of duty at an incident.

Functional Unit Debrief: at the conclusion of an operation by people in a functional role.

Incident Debrief: The debrief completed at the end of the Incident. The level of the incident refers to the type of Incident Management Team in place.

Seasonal Debrief: When activity warrants, it is conducted by both organisations at the conclusion of the fire season.

Areas for improvement

The DSE Code of Practice for Fire Management on Public Land, Revision 1, February, 2006 DSE Fire Management Manual 9.1: Recovery, and the CFA Operations Checklist 2007-2008 delineate a clear debrief process. However recent fire seasons have highlighted a need to provide personnel at the local level with supporting tools and techniques to assist debriefing that yields clear coherent issues to be redressed. Many of the issues from the 2002/03, 2005/06 and 2006/07 fire seasons should have been resolved at Local Level Debriefs, but instead were captured at a Formal Level Debrief and forwarded on as issues in State Debrief summaries. As a result there were many issues that should have been resolved locally and regionally that “choked” the operational improvement process for both organisations.

Key project officers with a responsibility for debriefing and performance improvement processes have identified the following areas for review:

- Debriefs do not always happen directly after a shift or deployment. The delay often results in mounting frustration within crews / teams with clarity around important issues being lost with time.
- Debrief information is not always recorded in a standard fashion. Templates from previous seasons demonstrate that actions for improvement are not always identified or recorded in a way that adds value.
- The analysis and outcomes of the process are not always distributed to participants, and are rarely forwarded centrally for analysis of trends and for broader dissemination of any identified improvements.
- Issues from local level debriefs are generally *passed up the line to fix*. This creates a perception nobody at local level is responsible for improvement.
- In some instances these issues remain as ongoing even though they should never have cascaded up beyond the fire-ground or work-centre level.
- Information is not captured, collated and analysed at the local level to ensure that themes are developed and appropriate action taken.
- Ongoing fire season commitments or need to return to core duties outside of incident roles mean that lessons are sometimes lost.

2008 presents an opportunity to address the performance gap at Local Level Debriefs. Staff at the fire-ground / work-centre levels must be provided with the tools and techniques to undertake debriefs and resolve issues at the appropriate debrief level.

There is also a need for personnel at the Local and Regional Levels to trust that issues elevated to State Level are assigned the relevant policy owners. This will ensure organisational improvement is underpinned by a system to capture and assign issues to the appropriate level of responsibility.

Key requirements of local level debriefing

- A debrief process at the local level must be efficient to ensure that crew / unit leaders can provide the group with a mechanism for capturing what worked well and what needed to be improved during the shift.
- Crew / unit leaders must be trained in local level debriefing techniques. These techniques must also be applied at the end of shift with requisite action taken.
- A clear chain of command must be delineated to determine how debrief issues are collected, collated and analysed at this level.
- Issues resolved at the Local Level result in safety improvements in real-time.
- Debriefs must be undertaken as soon as possible after the incident.

The way forward

DSE and CFA have identified the AAR methodology as an appropriate way to conduct debriefs to meet existing requirements at local level debriefs. The tools and techniques underpinning AAR are applicable to the following debrief components:

- hot debrief;
- shift debrief;
- tour debrief;
- functional unit debrief; and
- Level 1 incident debrief. Refer to Figure 2.

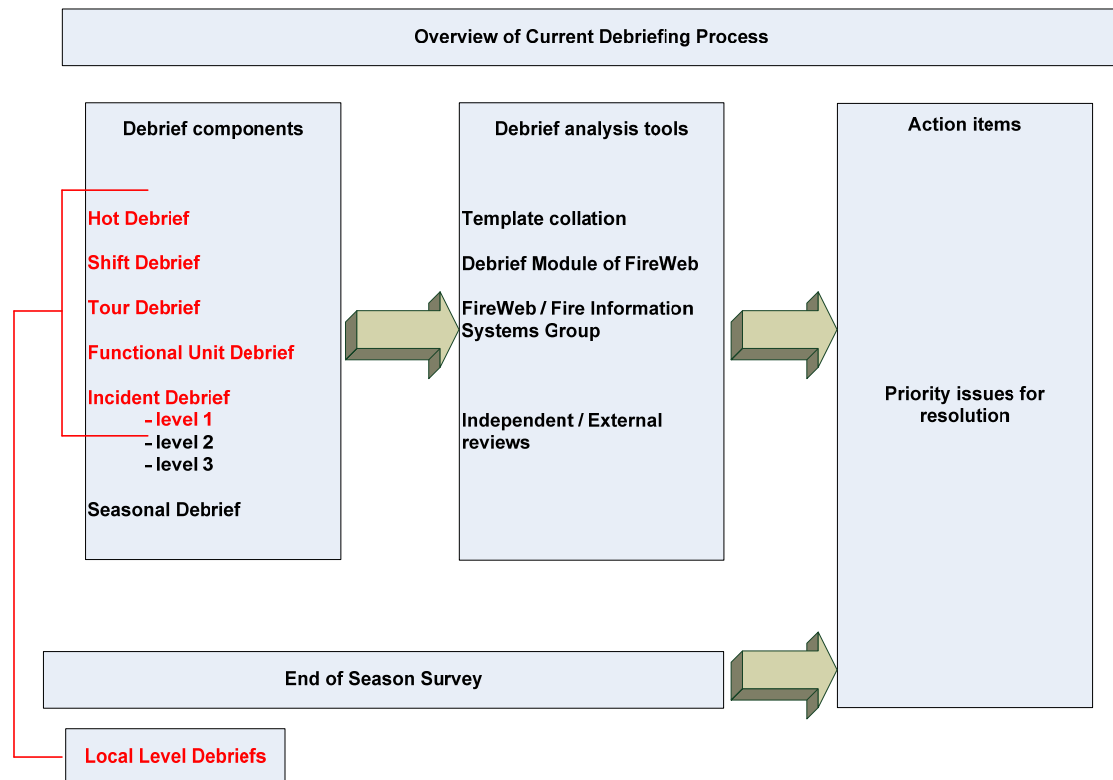


Figure 2.

After Action Reviews

In an emergency services context, an AAR is defined as “*a professional discussion of an event, focused on performance standards, that enables Agency Administrators and fire-fighters to discover for themselves what happened, why it happened, and how to sustain strengths and improve on weaknesses*” (National Wildfire Coordinating Group 2007a).

The following organisations currently include the AAR methodology as an integral part of their debriefing program:

- The US Army (Centre for Lessons Learned, 1993),
- The Canadian Army (Army Lessons Learned Centre, 2005)
- US Federal Fire Agencies (Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Centre 2007a, National Wildfire Coordination Group 2007b)
- New South Wales Rural Fire Service.
- Emergency Management Queensland.

Current status in Victoria: AAR methodology is being presented as part of the CFA Fireline Leadership Course. This year there are 13 courses being conducted. There have been approximately 700 CFA and DSE participants who have received training on the AAR process from many areas of the State. This gives the organisations a very large base to deliver the knowledge required for the process and support the program.

Proposal

It is proposed to formalise AAR methodology as the Local Level Debrief process within both agencies.

AAR provides a methodology for evaluation of an incident or project in order to improve performance by sustaining strengths and correcting weaknesses. These tools and techniques may be used at any level of the organisation. However, they are specifically focused at a base work-unit level, such as a vehicle crew, hand crew or other fire fighting group of people.

All AARs should follow the same general format, involve the exchange of ideas and observations, and focus on improving proficiency.

Concept Introduction

The key requirements of an effective After Action Review are:

- That it is completed at the end of the working shift.
“AARs occurring soon after the action tends to be more detailed, technique-specific, emotional and therefore more effective.” Mission-Centered Solutions, Inc. (2002).

“Crews and teams that integrate AARs into their daily routine are more successful in keeping the practice alive as stress and time demands increase during a busy fire season.” Mission-Centered Solutions, Inc. (2002).

- It is facilitated by the crew leader.
An AAR must be facilitated by a person who has received specific knowledge and acquired the appropriate skills to ensure the process is successful.
- The AAR focuses on what occurred and how we can overcome it next time.
- It follows a structured process of four set questions.

1. What was planned?

This establishes what was planned at the start of the activity, how it was to be carried out and what defined a successful outcome. It also confirms how much the crew understood what was expected of them in the beginning.

2. What actually happened?

To establish the facts, all crew members contribute to allow everyone to gain a complete understanding of what actually occurred. How did the actions vary from the original plan?

This question measures the success of the briefing and whether changes in assignments were understood by everyone.

3. Why did it happen?

Crew members should focus on “what” occurred to draw out explanations of why the activity was either successful or not. The members should not focus on who is to blame, rather what led to an action occurring. This question is an analysis of cause and effect, with focus on WHAT not WHO. The discussion here will lead to the group developing possible solutions for any shortfalls and also identifying and expanding on any identified strength or positive action.

4. What can be done next time?

When the crew has identified the problems, the solutions should naturally be brought out in the group discussion. The crew needs to focus on the problems they can fix, not those that are outside their control. They should also identify where the group performed well and ensure they maintain their strengths.

Issues that are not solved through the AAR process will be forwarded to the next level of the work group’s management. In the case of a Level 3 fire, a tanker crew would advise the Strike team leader, for a minor fire the work group would advise the CFA Catchment Officer or DSE Fire District manager. If the next level of the chain of command cannot solve the issue then it is passed on to the next higher responsible person. If the issue reaches a state level then it will be referred to the relevant Partnership Development Group Theme Owner. See Figure 3.

The AAR process will ensure that issues are resolved at the appropriate debrief level which will result in a streamlined improvement process.

After Action Review Process

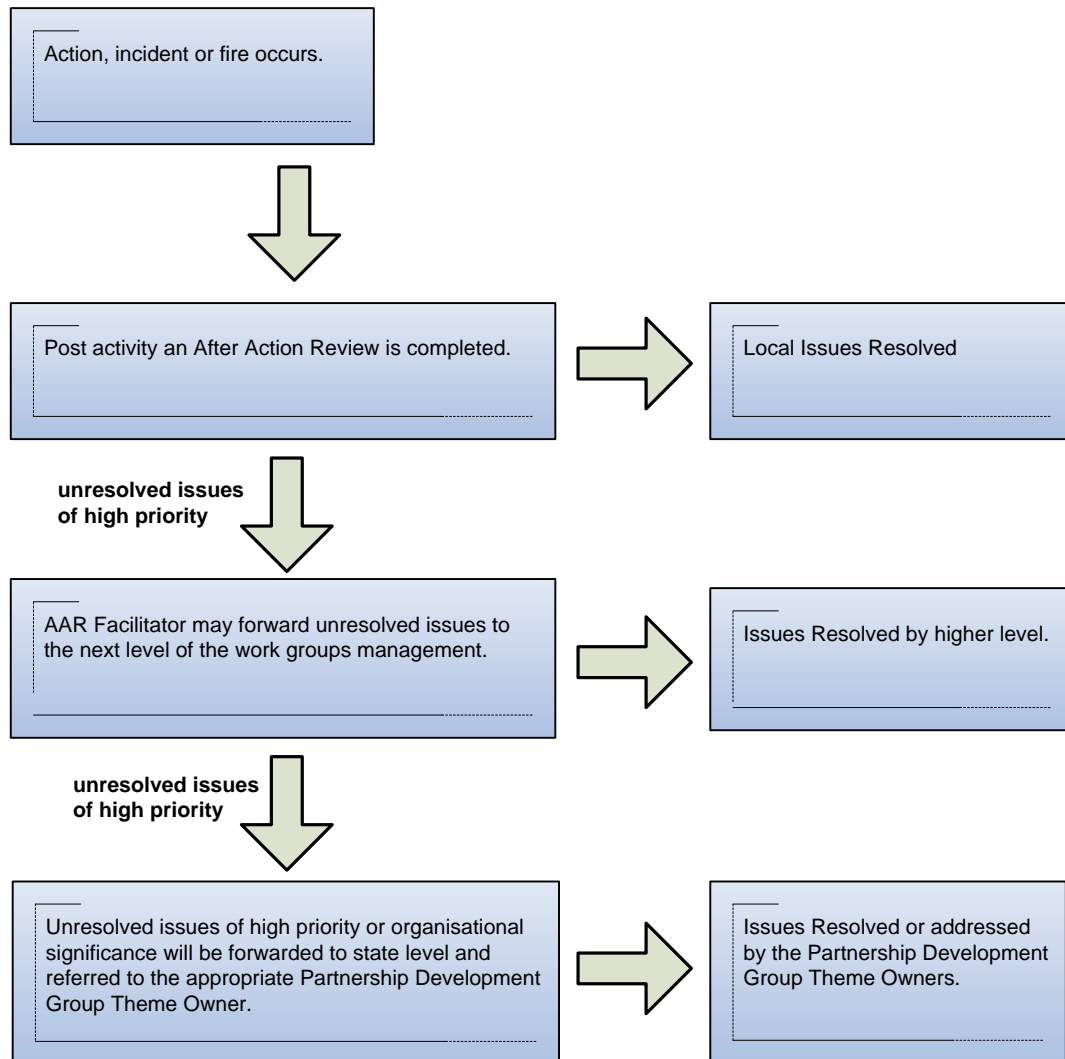


Figure 3.

Key Outcome

The desired objective is to achieve an organisational habit where members expect to, and participate in AARs after all activities, developing an environment that propagates organisational learning from ground up.

The final action will see the AAR tools and techniques formalised and complementing joint agency SOPs and training packages.

AAR will be training requirement for fireground personnel in a leadership role.

After Action Review Rollout

The roll out of the AAR methodology for the CFA and DSE will occur before the 2008/09 fire season. The process will take advantage of some of the 700 members who have previously received training in this area.

The training package will be developed by the instructor currently delivering the Fireline Leadership Course and facilitators will be appointed in each Region. Concurrently the AAR process will be included in future syllabus for all fire fighting training and also used during instructional sessions.

The Discussion paper is available for comment from the 19th May to the 22nd August, 2008.

References

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