Communications

Operational Briefing, Operational Debriefing and Changeovers

Acronyms:

EM	Emergency Management
PPRR	Prevention Preparedness Response Recovery
SEMP	State Emergency Management Plan
SMEACS	Situation, Mission, Administration, Control and communication, Safety

Purpose

After reading these notes you will have developed knowledge about:

1. The processes used by emergency services for communicating information
2. How to deliver a briefing and debriefing
3. Preparing and delivering a changeover
4. When to perform a brief/debrief
5. SAVEMs expectations of how and when briefs and debriefs will occur

1. Introduction

Clear, consistent, and timely communication is crucial to managing emergency responses. Responders need to provide and receive simple messages, keep the information consistent and meet time frames. Communications between personnel at emergency incidents is different to day to day communications: your role is different, policies and procedures are different and you are usually working under time constraints. For this reason, the emergency services use a common approach to communicating and information sharing between personnel.

This note explains the system that is used across all emergency services in Australia and by SAVEM for communicating information.

2. Briefings

i. **Why do we brief?**

Briefings are necessary for anyone who needs information to participate safely and effectively in any activity.

We brief you to provide information so your team is able to complete their allocated task(s) in a safe and timely manner. Briefing is essential for good incident management and as part of the communication process and information flow.

Briefings ensure personnel are adequately prepared for their role or the activity they have been assigned. Briefings provide information that will help personnel select the correct equipment and tactics, makes them aware of the conditions they will be working in and reduces uncertainty.

ii. **What is a briefing?**

A briefing is:

- A process that provides individuals, teams or groups with:
    - Instructions and preparatory information
    - Context, intent and updates on progress towards goals and tasks
- A communication tool
- Critical aid to information flow
- Can be simple or complex depending on the audience and the purpose

iii. **When do we brief?**

Briefings should be provided:

- At the start of a shift or rotation
- When the situation changes
- At changeover

You should have a briefing at least daily before you start your shift but they may occur more frequently if needed.

iv. How do we brief?

Briefings should always be **BRIEF.** Operational briefings must be concise and not include discussion or complex decision-making**.** Operational briefings should not be any longer than 25 minutes. Briefings can be 'cascaded' to focus on the information relevant to each level of operations. This means commander briefs section heads, then section heads brief team leaders, then team leader brief crew members.

All emergency responders use a standard format for delivering briefings. This allows us to understand what information will be provided and in what order.

The format used is **SMEACS** (See attachment A for details). You need to know and understand this acronym so please read the details in the Attachment.

SMEACS is used by all emergency services. This means information is presented in a uniform way so it is more likely to be remembered by those receiving the briefing. This format is usually presented as an Action Plan (More on this later in the training notes for Information Management).

> **SMEACS** is an acronym everyone must understand and follow when delivering or receiving a briefing.

The SMEACS format is designed to inform you of:

1. What is to be done
2. How it is intended to be done
3. What is available to carry out the tasks
4. The role of the group/individual

Briefings should also confirm:

1. Standards of work
2. Priorities and timeframe
3. Reporting arrangements and responsibilities

> Briefings are usually delivered by the team/unit leader. They may be done face to face or over a telecommunication system such as radio or video conference.

v. Who do we brief?

Anyone who is assigned tasks or involved in the incident should receive a briefing. Any person who has personnel reporting to them must deliver regular briefings to their team.

If you are at an incident and you have not received a briefing, then ask for one.

Do not undertake activities without understanding what your task and responsibilities are.

vi. Your role at a briefing

If you are receiving a briefing your role is to:

- Be on time
- Listen
- Not interrupt
- Take notes

Briefings are not a time to have discussion or make complex decisions. This should have already occurred. In other words **briefings are not:**

- A question and answer session
- General information session
- A 'How to do it Guide'

vii. Types of operational briefings

Deployment (Start of Rotation)	This can be verbal or written into an action plan. You may receive this as an email.
Start of shift	Provided at the start of each shift. May be verbal or written.
Changeover	Provided by outgoing to incoming personnel who are taking over a role in the response.

3. Debriefings

i. What is a debrief?

A debrief is a discussion that is held at the end of a task, shift, rotation or incident. Debriefings provide valuable feedback, intelligence and validation on systems and processes. They are an opportunity to learn and improve operations and contribute to plans. Debriefings attempt to discover why things happened. This process also facilitates development of the team by sharing their experiences.

A debrief should not judge success or failure but discover why things happened the way they did. It should focus on the tasks, processes and systems.

In its simplest form a debrief is a discussion by a team in the vehicle on the way back to base or at the end of a shift at an operations centre. There are also formal debriefs where an independent facilitator might be engaged − for example after the incident is over.

The result should be:

- Pinpoint areas for improvement
- Share experiences
- Identify innovation and successes

It is important to remember that a debrief is **not the time to**:

- Judge success or failure
- Personally attack somebody

Any of these issues should be raised with your team leader or other trusted person as a one on one discussion.

ii. **Why do we debrief?**

A **debrief i**s a simple, yet powerful tool that enables a team to self-correct, build team cohesion, and enhance their performance. Debriefing supports the development of better practices and processes. It provides an opportunity for feedback so that we can refine the way we do things. Regardless of whether the activity has gone well or poorly, debriefings allow us to identify what we should continue doing or where change is required. This will result in:

- Improved efficiency and effectiveness
- Learning from mistakes
- Preventing confusion about priorities
- Educating and motivating the team

Debriefing objectives are to:

- ✔ Identify issues and opportunities
- ✔ Identify possible ways to resolve issues or build on opportunities
- ✔ Validate the contribution of individuals

iii. **Who do we debrief?**

Debriefs should include anyone who was involved in an activity. Everyone who is involved should be given the opportunity to give feedback. Your team leader is responsible for debriefing you and if this does not happen you should ask for the opportunity. By having this discussion as a group, you will build a better understanding and improve the performance of the team.

iv. When do we debrief?

Type of debrief	When
Shift	At the end of your shift before personnel disperse. Led by team leader.
Rotation	Maybe done before you demobilise but maybe done after return to home. Led by team leader.
Post Incident	After the incident. Depending on size and complexity may occur immediately after and up to several weeks later. Can be conducted at a team, agency (i.e. SAVEM) or inter-agency level. Usually conducted by an independent facilitator.
Campaign	Occurs at the organizational level after a major event or series of events e.g. end of fire season debrief. Usually conducted by an independent facilitator.
Critical Incident	This occurs after a critical incident i.e. someone is seriously injured (physical or psychological) and are therefore rare. These are **conducted by specialist personnel** who have been specifically trained in this area.

Debriefings should occur at the conclusion of an operational period which may be a shift, rotation, incident or campaign.

v. **How do we debrief?**

The debrief will usually explore four questions:

1. What did we set out to do?
2. What actually happened?
3. Why did it happen?
4. What can we change to do better next time?

From this you can:

- Group things into:
  - What is within the group’s control
  - Things beyond immediate control of the group and pass this on
- Rate importance of the issue
- Seek recommended changes
- Decide and agree on follow up actions

This should be recorded in some way and those allocated actions should be followed up. Records can be made as notes in a logbook or as a separate document.

A briefing gives someone information so they can do their job i.e. **before** you start the job

A debriefing draws out information or reviews actions taken i.e. **after** you finish the job.

4. Changeovers

What is a changeover?

A changeover is the transfer of a role to an incoming team member. Changeovers are important in the efficient and effective running of an incident. If inadequate or incomplete information is handed over to incoming team members it can potentially result in poor performance.

Why do changeovers?

A good changeover from the outgoing person to the incoming is vital to the running of an incident. It is not merely about handing your new counterpart a file full of information and expecting them to interpret it all. Some reasons why changeovers are so important include:

- To ensure all the good work done by the outgoing and previous participants is not lost or duplicated because contacts and knowledge gained is not passed on.
- To provide continuity of operations and error avoidance.
- To ensure the efficient and effective functioning of the team.
- To maintain safety of all personnel

How do we do a changeover?

In general, we usually combine a brief and debrief to do a changeover. The outgoing briefs the incoming and the incoming debriefs the outgoing.

The types of information you may want to include in your changeover include:

- What actions have been taken
- Key pieces of information
- Key features that will ensure continuity of operations
- Warn of potential pitfalls
- Provide relevant knowledge and contacts to avoid wasting time finding information

In General

1. Decide:
    - When to do a changeover: avoid times critical to operational activity
    - What to pass on
    - How you want to do it
    - Allow sufficient time
2. Prepare by:
    - List 3 things that you feel went well for you during the rotation.
    - Organise shadowing for incoming personnel
    - Organise meeting of relevant contacts
    - Start with situational awareness session

- **Create a written changeover file** – consider including the following items:
  - Job descriptions, both as outlined in the SAVEM plan and more details about what you have been doing on a day-to-day basis
  - Report of your rotation – what went well, what didn't? Why? (identify potential issues and risks)
  - Ongoing issues/work
  - Who is doing what in the group
  - Meetings/briefings that need to be attended
  - Contact list
  - Who to go to for support
  - Logbook
  - Debriefs notes or reports
  - YOUR OWN CONTACT DETAILS ONCE YOU STAND DOWN

3. Refine:

Tailor your changeover to the existing knowledge of your replacement (have they played before)

- Create an ongoing changeover file that holds a record of your role throughout the event (add to this folder during your rotation)
- Think about any knowledge that only exists in your head and get it down in the logbook before you move on!
- Create Checklists

If you are receiving a changeover you may want to think about the information you want to receive. If it is not provided, ask for it. Remember the outgoing team will be tired and may need some prompting.

The key point is that changeovers should transfer information from one shift to the next so that continuity of operations is maintained

6. Attachment A: SMEACS

1.0 SITUATION <u>What is the current situation?</u>	Situation paragraph is brief – ● What has happened ● What is to be done ● May only be an update ● May include maps and displays
2.0 MISSION <u>What tasks are to be achieved?</u>	The statement of the commander's intent and the specific objectives for this operational period. Succinct description of what is to be achieved – ● Clear, concise, and unambiguous ● Mission for **that briefing period only** ● Members of the team must know what their mission is at the end of the briefing ● Usually starts with 'To …'
3.0 EXECUTION <u>How is the mission to be achieved?</u> What are your specific tasks? What are the priorities and timeframes?	● General outline ● Groupings and tasks ● Coordination – timing and sequencing ● Tasks and resource allocation
4.0 ADMINISTRATION & LOGISTICS <u>Information to support the mission</u>	● Support – fuel, vehicle, radio system ● Welfare – Accommodation and meals ● Drugs and equipment ● Ground/medical support
5.0 CONTROL & COMMUNICATIONS <u>Chain of command and methods of communication</u>	<u>Organisational Chart</u> – Who is reporting to whom and where are they <u>Communication Plan</u>: Method of Communications – radio, telephone, other When do we report and to whom Contact Details
6.0 SAFETY <u>What are the hazards for this operational period?</u>	Identification of known or likely hazards for this operational period ● Specific weather hazards ● Specific first aid ● 'Watch-Out' situations

Questions: those receiving the briefing are encouraged to ask questions to clarify or seek additional details, so they understand what is required of them. This should only be done after the briefing is complete.

Never interrupt a briefing with questions.

It is not a time to debate decisions or plan activities.