

**HOW TO CREATE
SUPERIOR BRIEFINGS**

by

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FOREWORD

Briefings – whether oral or written – are the principal means by which most public servants communicate with their Ministers.

While there is widespread agreement on what constitutes an effective briefing, there is no generally available guidance on how to produce such superior briefings. Those looking to improve their briefing skills must learn from their own experience and rely on sometimes painful feedback. Some prefer to think that good briefings depend on those "born, not made" with the necessary skills.

This paper is based on the premise that briefing is a service. It assumes that this service can be improved significantly if those providing the briefing do not have to rediscover all the required knowledge and skills – the art and science – of briefing for themselves. This is a practical guide to improving briefings.

"How to create superior briefings" is based on a distillation of accumulated Ottawa experience on this subject. Successive drafts of the paper were discussed at best practices exchanges organised by CCMD that brought together practitioners with diverse points of view on the process, including Legislative Assistants, Parliamentary Relations Officers, Directors General responsible for coordinating departmental efforts, Chiefs of Staff and Deputy Ministers. Former Ministers, as the ultimate clients, were also interviewed to obtain their own unique perspective.

This approach is consistent with CCMD's philosophy of sharing the knowledge and skills of all members of the management group.

The result of this distillation is a practical guide to a superior briefing service – from understanding basic principles of good communication to providing organisational structures to support departmental briefing activities.

Checklists for different types of briefing are provided as annexes.

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SUMMARY

Briefing is a service. Effective service delivery means constantly working to meet the needs of the customer more closely and training everyone involved to always provide superior service.

Briefing is the service of delivering information. In the past, briefings in government were primarily written, although in the private sector oral briefings are the rule. At least in part, this was because a written memorandum is an efficient way to develop the multi-dimensional consensus required among Ministers and their officials in a democratic government. The "Information Revolution" has shortened the time available for decision making by speeding up the dissemination of news. The result has been a trend away from carefully crafted memoranda based on exhaustive consultation towards shorter written briefings and oral presentations. While good literary skills were prized ten years ago, and an ability to quickly reduce a problem to its essentials is still mandatory, the need now is shifting to an ability to present the issue as superb slides. Increasingly, a mastery of computer languages is required.

The paper is divided into three parts.

The first part deals with how to improve the management of briefings in an organisation. This part is addressed primarily to the officer who is ultimately responsible. In government this is usually the Deputy*. There are two sections in this part that deal with the requirements for:

- 1.1. a knowledge of the preferences of Ministers and an understanding of their needs; and
- 1.2. an organization that delivers a high quality briefing and provides effective follow-up.

The second part of the paper deals with the areas that require attention in the production and presentation of briefings, namely:

- 2.1. an appreciation of the context and therefore an understanding of why and how to brief;
- 2.2. an understanding of the key characteristics of a good briefing; and
- 2.3. the characteristics of a good author.

The third part of the paper provides checklists for authors when briefing someone for the first time, and of written and oral briefings and Question Period briefings as sections 3.1, 3.2, 3.3 and 3.4 respectively.

* In order to be brief while avoiding the creation of further jargon, the terms Deputy, author and Minister are used to denote the person responsible for briefing, the person preparing the briefing and the person or persons to whom the briefing is addressed respectively.

THE MANAGEMENT OF BRIEFINGS

1.1 THE PREFERENCES AND NEEDS OF THE MINISTER

The primary requirement in the successful delivery of any service is to meet the real needs of the customer. Obtaining mutual agreement between Deputy and Minister on these needs, and the Minister's preferences as to how these needs can be met, is fundamental to successful briefing. Some needs will be obvious, such as the need for accurate and timely information. Other needs, such as the need to manage the volume of briefings so that the Minister has time to eat and rest, are less evident but no less important. Individuals have different ways and speeds of learning, different backgrounds and interests, and different attention spans and management styles. These differences must be determined and taken into account.

- The Primary requirement is for Ministers to feel secure with their briefings, and in particular to trust the author to disclose all aspects of the issue fairly.
- When briefing someone for the first time it is important to establish at least their basic preferences in advance. Initial briefings should be prepared in layers. The basic information can be provided first, backed up by more detail when needed.
- The Minister's true needs are not always obvious. Most large bureaucracies can produce enough briefings to swamp even the most assiduous Minister. Some appear to delight in suffocating new Ministers. Some selection is clearly necessary. One of the key responsibilities of the Deputy is to establish the real needs of the Minister, gain an agreement that these are indeed the real needs and then communicate these needs to the rest of the organization.
- Once the Minister's preference for style of briefings, material to be read in advance or follow-up material have been established, these preferences should be respected. Presentations should be tailored to Ministers' needs, taking account of their preferences, knowledge and interests.
- Deputies can ensure that their senior officials are ready to advise the Minister by having them attend appropriate briefings early in a new mandate. This allows them to appreciate the particular Minister's style, and allows the Minister to develop the level of comfort and trust necessary to feel secure with their briefings.
- Political Assistants should not screen the Minister from departmental briefings, but can add value by providing their different perspective.

1.2 THE NECESSARY ORGANIZATION AND FOLLOW-UP

In large organizations briefings have to be managed and there must be a clear understanding of the context and the content, quality and priority requirements.

- If the organization is to take briefing seriously, the Deputy needs to take a visible interest in the process, communicate the requirements clearly and deliver appropriate rewards for excellence and sanctions for mediocrity. This is true for all briefings, but critically so for Question Period briefings where a Minister is most vulnerable to the consequences of careless briefing.
- The production of briefings in large organizations requires a management structure that provides rapid downward communication of needs and strategic direction and rapid upward communication of information, as well as an unrelenting attention to quality control.
- **The author should always be clear on why the briefing is necessary.** If the author is unclear on the aim then the briefing will amplify the confusion. Clear direction to the author on the context allows the briefing to be focused on the correct issues.
- The system used should quickly raise the important issues and remove the trivial. It should also provide guidance on the level of detail required.
- Continuing attention is required to ensure that the needs of the Minister are met and their preferences respected, and that briefings are of consistently high quality and delivered on time.
- Follow-up on promises made in briefings and by those who use the briefings are integral to the briefing function and deserves as much attention as the rest of the process.
- A periodic review of the direction, style and content of briefings, particularly after the first several months, is useful to ensure maximum effectiveness.
- Authors should receive **constructive feedback on their products.**

THE PRODUCTION OF BRIEFINGS

2.1 WHEN TO BRIEF

Many briefings will be requested, but there are cases where authors should initiate briefings. The latter situations require the author to exercise judgement on when and how to brief. All senior executives are exceedingly busy, but Ministers are under extreme time pressure. On many occasions Ministers have only minutes to grasp the key elements of a situation. The need for unsolicited briefings should always be carefully considered and the subject presented in a way that will attract the Minister's attention.

The test of when to brief is always whether the Minister really needs to know.

- A briefing is required when the author is convinced that the Minister really needs to know. The test is the need of the Minister, not the originator. Managers at all levels, but particularly those in the field and in operational areas, should be sensitive to the needs of senior management for timely information on emerging issues. You should not assume that senior management knows about a situation unless you told them. Being blind sided is anathema to senior managers and Ministers.
- A good briefing is not one that simply solves today's problem, but one that places the subject in the context of the organization's strategic direction and advances this strategy. An understanding of the organization's mission is an excellent base upon which to build.
- The briefing must be delivered and grasped by the Minister, while it can still be useful. A brilliant briefing that is delivered too late is worthless, but repeated shoddy last minute briefings indicate bad management of the process.
- A briefing, whether a quick oral explanation or a set piece with audio-visual aids and a large cast, requires selection and organization of the material to be presented. The level of detail in the briefing should reflect the importance or urgency of the issue to the Minister.
- Where the overload problem is severe, as in the case of Ministers, the author must begin by showing why the issue deserves the recipient's immediate attention.

Questions to ponder:

Does the author know exactly why the briefing is required?

Is the subject presented in its strategic context?

Does the Minister really need to know all of this?

Would a short note now prevent surprises later?

Is the level of detail appropriate to this subject, at this time and for this Minister?

Is it clear why the Minister would want to deal with this issue now?

2.2 THE KEY CHARACTERISTICS

The key characteristics of a good briefing are that it is readily understood, accurate and timely.

Briefings should be simple, accurate and always timely.

- The context and the reason for the briefing should be kept firmly in view. If the purpose is to introduce the subject the briefing should be short and offer more details if requested. If the recipient is known to be bored at the mention of the subject the topic should be related to a context in which the recipient has a keen interest. If the purpose is to obtain a decision the alternatives need to be clear and all the pros and cons fully presented.
- The bottom line must be known and how to get there should be planned. A briefing note should be less than two pages long. A longer note is simply an upward delegation of the decision on what are the key issues. Oral briefings should be short for the same reason.
- A briefing should be simple and to the point. A complicated explanation is an indication of the author's woolly thinking or a lack of comprehension. It never indicates a complex subject. The most memorable messages are simple and reflect great insight. No subject is too complicated to be explained simply by someone who really understands the subject.
- The facts presented must be based upon sound analysis and should be unassailable if humanly possible, or at the least have their limitations explained. Nothing detracts from the credibility of a briefing more than factual errors or sloppy analysis.
- Pictures or charts can often provide information that is more memorable than words.
- The briefing should be prepared using the best proven technology. A professional appearance is important for credibility.
- Jargon, technical terms and acronyms should be avoided, or if necessary explained, unless the recipient is certain to be familiar with them.
- Briefings should be delivered sufficiently far in advance to allow them to be digested and for questions to be asked and answered. A reasonable goal for most briefings is 48 hours in advance. Question Period briefings should be delivered by the required deadline for the same reasons.

Questions to ponder:

Is each part of the explanation necessary and as simple as it can be without major distortion?

Will the presentation attract this recipient's attention?

Has enough analysis been performed?

Have YOU double checked the facts and figures?

Does the briefing contain jargon that the recipient might not know?

Will the briefing be delivered well in advance of when it is required?

2.3 THE CHARACTERISTICS OF A GOOD AUTHOR

The distinguishing characteristic of a good author is the ability to see the forest for the trees. A sound knowledge of the subject matter, or an ability to acquire this knowledge rapidly, is a necessary but not sufficient qualification for success. The ability to present the subject in a way that is understandable and useful to the particular recipient is also essential.

A good author has the judgement to see the forest for the trees, and a sound knowledge of both.

- The ability to see the forest rather than just the trees is a question of judgement. At a minimum a judgement is required on: what factors are relevant; what are the common threads of evidence or the key patterns in the jumble of information upon which a prediction can be based; and what are the risks and benefits of the alternatives.
- The author must have sufficient command of: the subject matter to present it simply without distortion; one official language to do so clearly and cogently; and the technology to do so professionally.
- A good author will consider how the recipient will use the information, and tailor the briefing accordingly. For a briefing for Question Period for example, it is useful to consider the effect the proposed response would have in the House or if shown out of context on the National News.
- Authors should not be afraid to admit that they do not have certain facts – provided that this does not happen very often – but the required follow-up should be clearly agreed. In such cases, good follow-up can redeem a poor briefing and in all cases good follow-up adds value.
- A good author recognises the strengths and the limitations of the recipient. A Minister who is a lawyer is unlikely to be familiar with the design criteria for a nuclear reactor, but will not need a background explanation of the common law.
- The author should always examine an issue with an open mind. This is particularly important for public servants. Those who become advocates for a particular point of view, technical or political, are not effective. On the other hand, sensitivity to the politics of the situation – not the partisan politics, but the public and press perceptions – is essential.
- The author must show enthusiasm for the subject, not just offer sterile facts. Humour can be illuminating within limits.

Questions to ponder:

Do the authors know their subject, their environment and their audience?

Do they know how this subject fits with the organization's strategic direction?

Have they identified and explained the central issues fairly and with sensitivity to the recipient's position?

Is the technology used helping to produce professional results or just getting in the way of the message?

AUTHORS' CHECKLISTS

3.1 INITIAL BRIEFINGS

When briefing someone for the first time the primary goal is not the transmission of information, but the establishment of a relationship of mutual trust and understanding.

- A Minister's basic preferences should be established in advance. These can usually be found by reviewing their educational background and talking to previous staff members. The obvious questions are whether the individual prefers oral or written briefings and in what level of detail, but it is also helpful to establish in what order they prefer information, oral or written first and background or recommendations first.
- Initial briefings are orientation exercises, and should preferably begin one on one, Deputy and Minister for example. The group can be expanded slowly and steadily from this solid base.
- Initial briefings should cover the handful of key issues, good and bad, that the Minister needs to know to understand the framework in which the organization operates.
- Initial briefings should be short, the equivalent of several notes of two pages or less. There should however, be a pyramid of information below each short opening briefing so that more detail can be quickly supplied as required.
- For new Ministers one key question to answer is the constituent's "What do you do as a Minister?" question.
- Briefings in more depth on issues and on organization are helpful to Minister's staff.
- Based on initial briefings of a Minister, the Deputy should transmit any new directions on briefings downwards quickly and clearly. Authors should listen carefully for any changes in direction when briefing new Ministers.

Questions to ponder:

Do the key issues chosen cover the organization's core business and the recipient's likely interests?

Is there more detailed information available behind this first briefing?

What changes in procedures are required as a result of the initial feedback?

3.2 WRITTEN BRIEFINGS

Before beginning to write you should know why the note is being written, your bottom line and the points you will cover. No matter what the formal structure, there are three main parts to a written briefing: the purpose; a summary of the facts; and the advice. These three parts should be presented briefly, with any further detail being provided in annexes. More detail in the advice section is appropriate for a note requiring a decision.

- The purpose or issue section should explain why the reader would want to take valuable time to read the note. It asks **the question that the rest of the note should answer**. Typically the issue begins with one of the five Ws (what, where, when, why or whether) or two Hs (how or how much).
- The summary of facts will necessarily be selective, but it should be as unbiased as possible. The aim is to present the facts required for the reader to be informed or make an informed decision. More detail is appropriate as an annex in early briefings and for decision making on a subject. **The facts should be presented in terms of their benefits or disadvantages** to the reader, not the technical features that interest the author. For example, the fact that an electric drill has certain features, such as speed and capacity, is less important than the fact that it drills holes well (a benefit). This section should present any real alternatives that were discarded and explain why. You should double check the facts.
- The advice or recommendations section should offer **the best intelligence that the writer can muster**. The presentation should be balanced and intellectually rigorous so that it is defensible against any attack. The advice should be pithy, but offered in a tone appropriate to the reader. The positions of other participants should be established and any opposing arguments should be presented with a good response.
- Presentation is important. Separate different ideas with paragraphs and use underlining or different type face sparingly for emphasis. Use point form if appropriate. Spelling, typographical and grammatical errors reduce the credibility of the message.
- Apply the surgeon's dictum, if in doubt cut it out, and Orwell's dictum, never use a long word where a short one will do. Avoid jargon and acronyms, unless they are sure to be familiar to the recipient, or if they are essential explain them.

Questions to ponder:

Exactly why is this note being written?

What is the bottom line and what key points must be covered?

Does the purpose section capture the interest of the recipient, that is does it demonstrate the recipient's need for this information?

Are YOU certain the facts are correct?

Is the note easy to read?

Does the recipient really need every phrase?

Is every sentence understandable on its own?

Does it raise any unanswered questions?

Does the advice section provide a credible stance for THIS recipient? Have the counter arguments been considered and responses provided?

If the recipient used the advice verbatim would it be consistent with previous positions?

3.3 ORAL BRIEFINGS

Oral briefings depend on interaction among people. Oral briefings require thorough preparation and the flexibility to be able to explain in several alternative ways if necessary. Oral briefings provide the chance for immediate feedback and should be structured to maximize this advantage. The briefing should proceed through successive layers of detail, with the option to move quickly to the conclusion from each layer. Educated adults theoretically have an attention span of only seven minutes, the briefing should therefore be broken into short, logical stages.

- Oral briefings should be structured to allow for questions and to take advantage of the availability of an immediate reaction. This provides the author with confirmation that the message has been received and allows the recipient to confirm their understanding and gather more details on areas of particular concern.
- Oral briefings allow the author to listen as well as talk. The author should take careful note of what is said or not said and the reactions to the discussions. This feedback should allow a more useful briefing to be prepared in the future.
- Oral briefings should use whatever prompts, a "deck" or overhead slides, that are helpful and the recipient finds useful. A hard copy of the "deck" is useful for the recipient to make notes on. Authors should avoid presenting another note which is an update to one already provided, because this begs the question of why it was necessary to read the original. The prompts can more usefully be pictures, diagrams or key phrases to support the oral briefing which should concentrate on the central issues.
- The author should prepare for the likely questions. The probable questions will depend upon the recipient's particular background and interests.
- Briefings are often curtailed or interrupted. The briefing should begin with a short explanation of the key elements, and should conclude with a short summary of the key elements or decisions required. If necessary, the introduction and conclusion can become the briefing.

Questions to ponder:

Is the briefing prepared so that areas can be contracted or expanded as required?

What are the likely questions? What are the answers?

Has a "three minute" version been prepared in case the briefing is cut short?

3.4 QUESTION PERIOD BRIEFINGS

Question Period briefings are an extreme case; they have the maximum potential for embarrassment and they are prepared under inflexible time constraints. While Question Period briefings are the most disruptive to a smoothly functioning organization they are of more personal importance to Ministers than almost any other. Question Period is a fundamental part of Parliament's ability to keep Ministers accountable, but it is an intensely political event. In the 1990s oral questions are a video event designed to surprise, shock and embarrass.

- Question Period provides the opposition a brief window each day to question Ministers in a very public forum about their actions or inaction. By tradition Ministers are responsible for all the actions of their officials as well as their own. Ministers will answer every question asked in some way or other.
- Question Period briefings must be on time. Question Period begins every day at the appointed time, whether or not the Minister is briefed. **Timeliness is therefore critical.**
- **Question Period briefings must be clear and absolutely correct.** In the very last resort, no information is better than incorrect data. Once the Minister has used the information it is not possible to change the very public record. Errors can be acutely embarrassing to the Minister and government, and have caused the resignation of Ministers and even officials. The briefing should be updated whenever there is a change or every few days for as long as it remains in the Minister's book. Other concerned departments should be consulted either author to author or through the department's briefing officer.
- **The key part of the note should be readable in 15 seconds.** When the question is being asked in the House the Minister has only a few seconds to turn to the correct tab of perhaps 40 in the book, and reread the main point.
- Question Period briefings are primarily the preparation of press lines, and they are not the place to engage in detailed explanations. However, those responsible for the briefing, normally the Minister's legislative assistant and departmental briefing officer need to understand the situation in order to be able to answer questions from the Minister. This means that the briefing should be delivered by the deadline requested, and **the author should be available over lunch on that day to answer questions by telephone.**
- The role of officials is to be operationally oriented and politically sensitive. Officials should respond sensitively to the public perception as well as the facts of the case, but should leave the partisan politics to the political staff. Officials should certainly know whether their region or sector is of particular concern to the Minister and to **the opposition critics and why this is the case.**

- Members of Parliament seeking a response to a technical or detailed question will usually table a written question. These should be treated as seriously as an oral question and the deadlines respected.

Questions to ponder:

Does the proposed response address the public perception as well as the facts in this case?

How would the proposed response sound if read verbatim in the House? or only parts of it on the national news?

What is the quotable quote for this note?

Have all the facts, and particularly the figures, been double checked?

Can we deliver the note on time?

Have the other concerned departments been consulted?