

Management Practices
No. 1

HOW TO CREATE SUPERIOR BRIEFINGS

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by

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Paper prepared for the
Canadian Centre for Management Development
February 1991

Reprinted, March 1992



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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 “bom, 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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Cynthia Williams
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February 1991

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.

0 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.

0 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.

0 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**.

0 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.

0 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.

0 **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 r'evue 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

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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:

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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?

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 alternative-s.
- 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**.

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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

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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?