

The Air Force Style Briefing

The purpose of this lesson is for students to comprehend the role and composition of an Air Force-style briefing.

Desired Learning Outcomes:

1. Describe common types of briefings.
2. Describe common delivery formats.
3. Explain the selection and use of visual aids.
4. State the qualities of a good Air Force style briefing; produce a high-quality briefing on a CAP topic.

Scheduled lesson time: 30 minutes.

Introduction

Sooner or later, you will have to speak in public. It comes with being in the Civil Air Patrol and the requirements will increase as you climb the ranks. If the thought makes you nervous, you're not alone! Research shows that most people place fear of public speaking second only to fear of dying. If you are inexperienced, the fundamentals and tips for polished speaking in this chapter will help you overcome this fear. If you are an accomplished speaker, use this as a review.

Your goal should be to improve your self-concept as a speaker. Think positively, and focus on improvement, not perfection. Like writing and listening, speaking is a skill; once you grasp the basics, the rest is practice, polish and style. You may be embarrassed by your initial mistakes, but you'll survive. Few of us will become expert speakers, but all of us can become more effective if we practice the basics. Learn all you can from your contemporaries; some of them are accomplished speakers. If you are already a speaker extraordinaire, share your views, tips and personal hang-ups about speaking with others. Everyone improves when they receive timely and objective feedback.

Briefings are BRIEF (short and concise), hence the term briefings. They may only last two to ten minutes but may last longer if the topic requires. Briefings cover a single topic. A key rule in verbal communication is to keep it short and sweet. Have your stuff together before you speak. Know what you want to say and then say it with your purpose and the audience in mind. (See DLO 1 in the AF Style Correspondence class of this course for more on being concise.)

Briefings are informative. They pass along the key and vital information that the recipients need to know. They do not go into details or related topics the person being

briefed cannot use. The information should be organized in a way that is easy to follow and easy for them to use.

Briefings are focused. They address one topic. If you have more than one topic you may need to have a series of briefings. An example of this can be found during an emergency services mission when the Incident Commander will brief the mission objective and the Communications Director will brief on what frequencies everyone is to use and so forth. Key here is to remember that each person talks about one topic, and each briefing taking only enough time to deliver the information.

Briefings are only for the people who have a need to know. This doesn't mean that CAP secrets information, but consider this: the Professional Development Officer likely does not need the details on the cadet orientation rides unless s/he is giving some of them. They could be spending their time on other things. The ground teams on a mission usually don't get invited to briefings highlighting current NOTAMs for the same reason. This does not mean that people who want to come to the briefing should be prevented from coming in most cases. It does mean that the people who need to know about the topic being briefed should be accommodated first.

There are instances however, when briefings are "closed-door." This may be for operational security reasons, to guard the privacy of involved CAP members in a confidential situation, to guard the privacy of family members of subjects of search or disaster relief efforts, or to protect proprietary information concerning the CAP Corporation (a practice common to all organizations of all sizes).

1. Describe common types of briefings.

Briefings can be grouped into four types: informational, debriefings, situational reports (SITREPS), and the planning brief.

Informational briefings talk about what has been done, what is being done, and what will be done. Informational briefings contain information that you need to know but may not use right this minute. A safety briefing is a good example. Other examples are minor changes routine things such as the addition of a new staff member at group, a new phone number, a change in the schedule or Standard Operating Procedure (SOP).

Frequently briefings might cover what has been done. These are called "debriefings". The purpose of this type of briefing is to inform those that need to know what has happened that will affect them or the mission as a whole. A professional will be able to pick out what the recipient needs to know and present it in an order that is easy for the recipient to use. Newer briefers may try to present too much or too little information, and this is normal until the briefer becomes more skilled. If in doubt about topic, scale, or audience, never be afraid to ask for assistance.

Debriefings talk about what happened. They can also discuss success, failure, what worked, and what didn't. It's important that the briefings be tailored to the audience. You

may attend the National Board and be asked to brief people on what happened there. While everyone may need to know that there is a change to the uniform only the Finance Officer needs to know about the new way to process membership dues. On a mission the Air Operations Officer will need to know what grids you covered, what your probability of detection was, the areas of interest you found (if any) and weather conditions. This effects his planning. He does not need to know that you were third in line to taxi when you departed. It has no effect on doing his job.

On occasion, you will give a briefing on what is going on now. In ES circles this is called a SITREP (Situation Report). Typically this is done in changeable situations. For example, the Incident Commander needs to know the current situation and what resources are currently engaged, what resources are available and the progress toward the mission objective. They need to know this for planning the next step or reacting to an unanticipated situation. You should see this type of briefing scheduled periodically at large activities like an air show or at long activities like an encampment or disaster relief mission. Picking out what they need to know about the current situation and what information they might need to know for situations you anticipate happening come from practicing empathy and also comes with experience. Selecting the appropriate information is something a mentor or more experienced officer can help you with.

Finally, planning briefings discuss what is going to happen. Or at least what is planned to happen. The information you need to put out here is:

- **The clearly stated goal** - How will you know when the goal is reached?
- **Safety** – This is a list of hazards people can expect to encounter, what to do to avoid/deal with the hazard and what are the reporting procedures.
- **Emergency procedures** -These are sometimes called back-up plans, plan b, or contingency plans. This is what should happen if the unexpected happens.
- **The roles people will play** in the success of the mission.
- **Limits of authority** – Most people will know this by the job titles and experience. However if you are doing something new, have inexperienced people, you may need to go over this.
- **Deadlines and time-lines** – Applications are due on ..., we will depart at ...and the drive should be around x hours, we should be back at ..., lunch will be at ... and last for x minutes. If you don't list this information everyone will be on their own schedule and it will cause disappointment, wasted resources, and crises.
- **The resources available** - The location of the resources, how you can access those resources, the limits on the resources.

Remember to be complete, but do not waste time. Be concise. Remember not to combine topics or areas. Use additional briefings if necessary.

2. Describe common delivery formats.

Delivery is usually determined by the content, briefer's style and the situation. You need to use the format that is best for that particular situation.

Content – Some briefings are general in content. Some are specific. Some briefings have a lot of information and some have little information. Some briefings are simple some are complex. Some briefings will contain information that is acted on right away; and other times contain information not acted on for months. Some briefings are a combination. In general if you are going to have a lot of information, very specific information or easily confused information or information with a long shelf life, use a handout.

Let's look at an example. There have been changes to the frequencies CAP uses. For most people telling them what the new frequency is, when it is to be used and how the change to their radio will be made is likely all they need to know. They probably should know why there was a change too. This briefing may take only a couple of minutes. On the other hand, if you are the Communications Officer who will be responsible for making sure all the radios are converted to the new frequency over the next three months, the briefing you receive will need to contain more detail. You need to know exactly what frequencies (they often go out to four places to the right of the decimal) and what tones need to be installed, what modifications to the radio may need to be made, what reporting needs to be done and so forth. This briefing likely would contain hand-outs, or may come in a series of smaller briefings over time.

Briefer's Style – Style is really an individual thing. You need to play to your strengths that are applicable to the content and situation. The wider variety of skills and more experience you have the more styles you can draw on. Good briefings have one more thing in common besides being BRIEF, informative, focused and for those who need to know. They are professional in their delivery.

- They show respect for and take into consideration the recipient's age, education, expertise, experience, position and time. (See the Professionalism class in this course.)
- They are logically organized. (See Effective Communication class in this course)
- They are appropriate for the audience. It is an appropriate topic whether it is a self-selected or a given topic. (See AF Style Correspondence class in this course).
- They are appropriate in terms of vocabulary and levity.
- They are well delivered in terms of tone, rate, volume, clarity, and stay within the allotted time, etc.

Most briefings lead to questions. There are several ways to handle questions. Many briefers have adopted the tactic of anticipating questions and including the answers in the briefing or visual aids.

Some people like to deal with questions when they come up. This has the advantage of clarifying things as you go, but for some people it throws them off their pace, or they lose their place. If you plan to use this method and don't mind interruptions you should announce the procedure at the beginning. It will encourage questions.

Some people like to ask for questions between each point. This allows people to get clarification as they go but it is harder for the briefer to maintain their train of thought.

Some people like to take all the questions at the end. This is good if the briefer easily loses their place or has a complex topic that will become clearer as the briefing continues. If this is your plan you need to announce this at the beginning.

3. Explain the selection and use of visual aids.

If you remember only one thing about visual aids, it should be that the visual aid is there to support you; you are not there to support the visual aid. While they can be extremely helpful at emphasizing a point, they can also distract the audience.

Visual aids serve two purposes. They are there to provide information that is too long or complex to give verbally. This can be done with a chart, graph or list. Visual aids are there to help the recipients identify the important points. This means that the only thing on the visual aid should be the important information.

Visual aids are not required at briefings. If the information is simple or you have few points to make, visual aids may not be appropriate. This brings up one of the most common errors, death by PowerPoint.

PowerPoint has been a blessing and a curse in the briefing business. It can help the briefer deliver a mountain of information in a very short period of time. It can also thoroughly confuse the issue at hand. The difference is the skill of the briefer at knowing when, how, and how much to use PowerPoint in any situation. To help you, here are six tips that will help you successfully use PowerPoint to support you in a CAP briefing.

- Plan for a duration of to three to five minutes per slide and no more than 50 words on a slide (this is typically a list of your main points). If you have a several points, some points have a lot of detail or expect a lot of questions then plan on five minutes a slide. If you are just giving the facts then three minutes a slide. If you have a graphic such as a chart, graph or picture plan on displaying less than eight words describing the graphic for about two to three minutes. The words typically identify the chart or picture which is an example or clarification of what you are talking about. If you have done the

math, a typical CAP briefing that lasts 2 to 10 minutes (at the most) should have 1 to 5 slides. Choose slide contents wisely.

- It is not a script to be read! If the audience can read the slide and get what they need to know, you are irrelevant.
- Use a plain medium color background (white works fine) with contrasting color words. A bright background is often hard on the eyes and dark backgrounds force you to use bright letters which become fuzzy in the back of the room. It is tempting to put a picture in the background but it is distracting for many and if it has a lot of colors, a variety of colors or a complex picture it will be hard to find a color for the font that will contrast. Simple is better.
- Slides should all be in the same layout. If you have a logo it should always be in the same place, all the backgrounds should be the same color, the graphic should always be in the same place, the font style and sizes should always be standardized. Recommended font sizes are as follows: title-40, sub-title-30, text-22 to 26.
- Try projecting it before the big day. The colors often look different on the monitor than when they are projected.
- Limit animation and other tricks. Try and keep the presentation to the information you want them to remember most.

Sometimes the participant only needs a portion of the information to effectively do their part in the mission. In that case you want to tell them where to look and a chart or list can be posted somewhere.

The same idea applies to handouts. Above we talked about when you have a lot of information, very specific information or easily confused information or information with a long shelf life it is good to use a handout.

Public speaking will be discussed in more detail in the Effective Communications lesson of this course so we will limit discussion to three things that will help your delivery when you are using visual aids during a briefing.

- Visual aids should be big enough for everyone to see. Obviously if you are going to post it and people can walk up to it (later) it can be smaller. If they are too small people will tune out while you are talking about it and it will be hard to get them back.
- Look at it or point at it, pause so that you have enough time to read/absorb the point it, then look back at the audience and talk about it. If the audience is still trying to look at the visual aid they are not listening to you. Or if they have switched to you talking before finishing looking at the aid, they have lost the point of the aid.

- Don't stand in front of the visual aids. This error is more common than you might guess. Some speakers get caught up in the VA themselves and lose their situational awareness.

Situation – If you are giving a mission briefing you could easily be standing at a distant airport or in a field. In this case you will be in a utility uniform, Audio & Visual (AV) support will likely be non-existent and time may be very short. On the other hand you may be giving a briefing at Commander's Call and have been allotted 10 minutes (more than most briefings need) on stage with the built in PowerPoint projector. In that case you will likely be in blues and you may want to take advantage of the AV.

4. State the qualities of a good Air Force style briefing; produce a high-quality briefing on a CAP topic.

This topic can be summed up in one word, preparation. Mark Twain said "If you want me to speak for an hour I am ready right now. If you want me to speak for 10 minutes I need a week to prepare". While funny, there is also much truth to the statement.

The qualities of a good briefing include the following: a specific topic, an organized delivery plan, solid preparation to include visual aids as required, practice, appropriate use of vocal characteristics such as rate, volume, pitch and pause to enhance the impact of their message, and awareness of non-verbal cues from the audience to ensure they are receiving the message.

As you conduct a briefing make eye contact and look for feedback. Play your audience. Let them know you are looking at and talking to them. It holds their attention. If you look only at your notes, you may lose your listeners—and you can't wake them up if you don't know they're asleep! Making eye contact with your audience will allow you to read their non-verbal actions and provide you with the opportunity to make immediate adjustments to your briefing to ensure its effectiveness.

Arrange an opportunity to give a briefing at one of the next few squadron meetings. You can self-select a topic or you can be given the topic. Brief more than a handful of people. Ask your mentor or one of the other members to critique your briefing using the criteria below. You will want to print out this page so they have it to work with. Once that is set up, go through this lesson and look for ideas you can use to prepare your briefing.

You should also mentally evaluate briefings you receive and think about how you would have given those briefings. It is a good way to get practice on wide variety of topics and techniques. Some questions to ask are:

- Was it brief (short & concise)?
- Did it cover all the information the audience needed to know? (Who, what, where, when, how, why).
- Was it focused on one topic?

- Was the briefing logical and easy to follow?
- How did the briefer handle questions? (Were the answers clear, concise, correct and quick in coming? Did they throw the briefer off their pace?)
- Was the topic appropriate for the people at the briefing? (Did they have a need to know, was it given at a level of understanding for the recipients age, education, background, experience, etc.?)
- Was the vocabulary and levity appropriate for the topic?
- How would you describe the briefer's tone, rate, volume and clarity of speaking?
- Other comments about delivery (gestures, posture, eye contact)
- Was the use of visual aids appropriate? Some briefings would benefit from slides or handouts or items posted on a wall for later review. If visual aids were used, were they of an appropriate size, did they distract from the presentation, were they well positioned, did they supplement what the briefer was saying? Did the visual aid support the briefer or did the briefer support the visual aid?

Lesson Summary and Closure

A briefing is a BRIEF presentation of information the recipients need to know. The information is organized in a way that is useful to the recipient. Briefings can provide general information or information about activities in the past, present or future. Their exact structure is dependent on the content, briefer's style and the situations.

Works Cited:

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AU-24, *Concepts for Air Force Leadership*

Kline, John A, *Speaking Effectively: A Guide for Air Force Speaker*