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IOTC Regional Observer Scheme

Observer Program Development & Logistic Coordination Workshop

Training Observer Debriefers

Interview Techniques

- Communication and communication skills
- Establishing a positive and professional relationship

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Interview techniques in debriefing

Interview techniques are commonly used for the selection of work candidates, to assess employees' knowledge, capacities and performance, and improve work strategies and processes. These strategies include the usage of effective communication and active listening techniques, of techniques used to establish positive and professional relations and to provide and request feedback. They also include standard procedures in the planning, preparing and conducting of interviews.

Interview techniques (including psychological tests) have been adapted and used in the recruitment of personnel and the debriefing of military and civilian personnel returning from field missions (often conducted under stressful conditions), with the primary objectives of identifying information errors and gaps in mission reports, to provide personnel with the opportunity to deal with psychological and emotional discomfort.

Similar to military personnel, observers working at sea are in a unique position, as they are required to work alone, often in hostile conditions, for long periods without the direct supervision or assistance from their controlling organisation, in an environment recognised worldwide as the most hazardous industry to work in. As such both classic and adapted interview techniques should be used by observer controlling organisation to recruit suited personnel (including psychological tests), in the debriefing of observers and in assessing observers' overall skills.

Communication and communication skills

Communication is defined as the act or process of using words, sounds, signs, or behaviours to express or exchange information or to express ideas, thoughts, feelings, etc., to someone else. This is a very broad definition but it does manage to encompass everything that makes up the concept of communication. Communication skills, by definition, are slightly more refined applications of the concept of communication. These skills consist of the ability to convey information both efficiently and effectively.

A good communicator will have good verbal, non-verbal and written communication skills.

What does each of this entail?

- **verbal communication** is the act of delivering information using the spoken word. If one can give clear and easy to follow directions over the phone, then he or she is a good verbal communicator;
- **non-verbal communication** includes the use of body language and facial expressions. Actors are masters of this kind of communication; because they have been trained to portray emotions or deliver whole messages simply by the way they hold their body and position their facial expressions; and
- **written communication** is simply the conveyance of information or instruction by utilizing the written word. This type of information exchange is often the easiest, especially for people who are uncomfortable with face to face encounters.

Most Effective Communications Techniques include:

The Golden Silence

Remaining silent can be one of the most effective strategies for communication, especially if trying to entice someone to share more information. Instead of immediately answering after the observer's

completed statement, one should remain silent but attentive. This can actually encourage observers to volunteer more information than they would have done otherwise.

Asking Questions

No matter how much information is readily volunteered, it is not likely that one can never learn everything they need to know without asking a few questions. Questions can be formulated as closed-ended questions or open-ended questions.

- closed-ended questions are designed to get a simple yes or no response. This can be a good tool if one needs to gather basic information quickly or wants to obtain an answer without a long or drawn out explanation; and
- open-ended questions will provide a broader and more comprehensive answer.

Listening

Communication is effectively useless if one doesn't listen and comprehend the responses provided to one's message. Listening isn't just hearing (i.e. using one's ears to collect sounds), it's a mental process where one understands the things that are said in such a way that it can form a coherent and knowledgeable response.

Active listening is the process by which an individual secures information from another individual or group. The "active" element involves taking steps to draw out details that might not otherwise be shared. Active listening redirects ones' focus from what is going on inside of ones' head to the needs of the observer. During debriefing, it can help build rapport with the observer. Active listeners avoid interrupting at all costs, summarize and repeat back what they have heard, and observe body language to obtain an extra level of understanding.

Active listening techniques includes verbal and non-verbal techniques.

In face to face debriefing sessions the use of **verbal techniques** described below demonstrates that the debriefer is listening.

- use of short interjections to make unobtrusive signals that show that one's listening without interrupting observer train of thought ('Yes', 'right', 'OK' 'ah ha' etc.);
- reflecting back observer words, thoughts and feelings by subtly emphasising their own words;
- use of positive affirmations such as 'it sounds like you handled that well' or 'it seems like you've made tremendous progress' is a great way to bolster observers self-esteem and to keep observers positive frame of mind whilst showing that one's listening and trying to understand them;
- asking intuitive and clarifying questions based on observers' responses. Debriefing questions should not exclusively consist of a series of pre-planned questions. By asking intuitive and clarifying questions based on what the observers has being saying, the debriefers shows they are listening to the observer; and
- providing brief summaries, every now and again, of what has been said serves as a useful check to confirm that the debriefer has heard and understood the observer correctly.

Furthermore, the use of **non-verbal techniques**, listed below, shows that the debriefer is paying attention. The use of an appropriate body language being especially important when the observer is in full flow, when verbal interruptions by the debriefer might hinder its speech.

- keeping eye contact shows that the debriefer is listening. If taking notes, the debriefer should ensure that this doesn't stop him from looking at the observer for the entire session!

- positive facial expressions - smiling, looks of empathy, etc.- all naturally responding to the observer will indicate the debriefer is listening. The debriefer should avoid expressions which might indicate judgment such as raised eye-brows or head shaking;
- a slight nod of the head is great for showing that one has heard and understood; and
- leaning slightly towards the observer and keeping an open posture (arms open as opposed to folded) indicates one is open to and interested in what the observer is saying.

As with any technique, listening techniques should not be over-used and always used authentically.
A final word of warning, if the debriefer uses active listening techniques whilst not listening the observer will not be fooled!

Feedback

The provision of feedback is an important part of communication, both from the intended recipients and from the debriefer. The debriefers should be able to convey information in such a way that observers can offer feedback or criticism on information provided. The observers should be provided a platform to form direct questions if anything is left unclear.

Stress Management

Communication can be very stressful. If the debriefers find themselves overly stressed by a situation, they should remove themselves from it for a few moments. This could be any situation that causes stress or anxiety, such as an argument or disagreement with the observer. The debriefers should simply step away for a moment and take the time to compose themselves. Once recomposed, the debriefers will be able to approach the situation with a clearer head and communication will become infinitely easier.

Empathy

Empathy and/or emotional awareness are also essential for a clear transfer of information. The debriefers should recognize when their own emotions are causing issues with the communication. Furthermore, by being empathetic the debriefers should develop the ability to discern when the emotions of others are likely to cause a problem.

Enthusiasm

One of the easiest ways to get someone to respond in a positive manner when communicating is to appear enthusiastic in regards to what they are telling you. This can be as simple as maintaining eye contact, and modifying your body language to appear attentive and interested. Emphatic positive responses can help to magnify this feeling of enthusiasm. As a result, the observer will be more open and will end the conversation with an overall positive outlook. The debriefers should avoid negative reaction such as sighting, rolling its eyes, or showing signs of being impatient or bored during a debriefing session.

Language Choices

The words the debriefer chooses to express a situation or to make a statement can have a dramatic effect on the observers' overall receptiveness to the debriefer's communication skills. If trying to foster a sense of solidarity and cooperation, debriefers should use pronouns like "we" and "us" to refer to the group. This will help observers to consider themselves as part of a team, rather than as an individual. "We need to come up with a plan to deal with this situation", implies that everyone is equal and can contribute to the group. Alternatively, if the debriefer is trying to set himself apart, using pronouns like "I" and "me" should be used to do that effectively. "I need to come up with a plan to deal with this situation", implies

that debriefer has taken the responsibility to come up with a plan, and that the observer will be expected to implement the said plan once it has been completed.

Sense of Humour

Keeping a sense of humour, even when things are looking bad, can be a great way to augment debriefers communicative skills. Everyone likes to laugh, and laughing relieves stress and releases endorphins, which can help to improve the overall mood of the conversation. Debriefers should ensure however that humour is appropriate to the situation. Using common sense and discretion where humour is concerned is often the safest bet.

Smiling

Nothing sets a nervous observer at ease better than a friendly smile. A smile is a debriefers' best tool and its best weapon rolled into one. A genuine smile can often entice an otherwise quiet or reserved person to be more open and willing to communicate. They are invaluable for setting nervous or apprehensive observers at ease.

Where a genuine smile can encourage feelings of warmth and safety, a dangerous smile can create apprehension or even fear. This can be an advantage if a debriefer finds itself facing a particularly unpleasant situation created by an observer. This sort of smile usually will not reach the eyes, but leaves no doubt as to who is in charge in the current situation.

Honesty

Honesty is often one of the largest barriers to effective communication, but it is one of the easiest to overcome. Effective communication is largely based on trust. Debriefers should show that they have put absolute trust that the observer will not attempt to mislead them.

If the debriefer feels they need to withhold the truth, for whatever reason, they should take a step back and remove themselves momentarily from the situation, to determine why they feel this way, and from there, they should be able to easily determine the correct course of action to take forward.

Establishing a positive and professional relationship during debriefing

Human beings are naturally social creatures – we crave friendship and positive interactions, just as we do food and water. So, it makes sense that the better our relationships are at work, the happier and more productive we're going to be. To develop positive and professional relationship during the debriefing process, the debriefer must be willing to listen to observers, communicate openly, and respect himself and the observer. Building a positive and professional relationship also involves getting to know observers as individuals. Observers who have a good work relationship exhibit high morale, that enhances their work engagement and increased satisfaction at work.

Actions that help the debriefer establish a positive and professional relationship with the observer

- being friendly and encouraging to the observers;
- being responsible - if the debriefer says is going to do something, he should do it. If the debriefer makes an error or doesn't know something, he should acknowledge his mistake or ignorance and make it clear how he plans to fix it;
- welcoming diversity - when observers offer a different opinion, the debriefers should take the time to consider what they have to say, and factor their insights into their decision-making;
- developing mutual respect – when a debriefer respects the observer, and values their input and ideas, the observers will in turn show increased respect for the debriefer and value his input and ideas. The

debriefers should let observers know they and their work is considered important. One way to demonstrate respect is to offer positive affirmations;

- being mindful – the debriefers should pay careful attention to their words and actions and should not let their own negative emotions impact the observer;
- communicating effectively - the foundation of every good relationship is solid communication. Whether the debriefers are communicating via e-mail, phone, or face to face, they should ensure that communication with the observers is clear, honest and effective;
- choosing words carefully – the debriefers should make sure that they clearly articulate their points and state exactly what they mean. This will help avoid confusion about goals or expectations;
- getting to know the observer - one of the best ways to build positive relationships is to make time to learn about people. Before starting debriefing the debriefer should take a minute to chat with the observers and to learn more about them as a person by asking questions on their day to day life; and
- conflict resolution skills - unfortunately, during the debriefing sessions conflicts might arise from time to time. Should that be the case; the debriefer should ensure that the observer is provided enough time to share his or her side of the story. It is advisable that parties are provided time to calm down before attempting to address the situation.