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How to Facilitate a Debriefing

Barbara Steinwachs
Training Consultant

Preparing to facilitate the debriefing part of a simulation game requires as much care and attention as preparing to lead the introductory and play parts. This article provides a sort of mini-manual, explaining the nature of facilitating and then guiding the reader through the three phases of description, analysis/analogy, and application. It suggests questions a facilitator might use during each of these phases.

KEYWORDS: *analogy phase; analysis phase; application phase; debriefing; description phase; facilitate; simulation game.*

“Everyone who just played the game holds one piece of a giant puzzle. We won’t know what the puzzle looks like until we bring all our pieces together and examine them.”

Sandra Mumford Fowler

“You need the game to get the horse to water, but if you keep up the excitement of play, the horse may not drink anything.”

Thiagi

Last year I had the opportunity and the honor to edit and in part rewrite a manual for Thiagi’s (Sivasailam Thiagarajan’s) short but elegant BARNGA (Thiagarajan & Steinwachs, 1990), a simulation game on understanding and bridging cultural differences. Thiagi designed BARNGA to be both easy to use and versatile. Its culture-general focus makes it adaptable to a wide variety of settings. It can be played with a group of any size (9 to 100 or more) in a flexible time period (from one to two hours). Participants have great fun playing, and are energized by the experience of discovering that in spite of

AUTHOR’S NOTE: I would like to thank Intercultural Press (P.O. Box 700, Yarmouth, ME 04096, USA; this modification of the debriefing section of *BARNGA: A Simulation Game on Cultural Clashes* was made with permission. © 1990 Intercultural Press), and SIETAR International (The International Society for Intercultural Education, Training, and Research), which originally commissioned the writing of the BARNGA manual. And cheers to Linda Lederman and David Crookall for creating this special issue devoted to an aspect so critical but all too

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186

many similarities, people from the other culture have differences in the way they do things.

All these characteristics suggested that many people not yet familiar with simulation gaming might well run this game as their first. Therefore, I wrote the manual in great detail, giving more attention than usual to how to prepare, how to introduce, and especially how to debrief. The publisher, Intercultural Press graciously granted permission to share the debriefing section of the manual in this special issue.

You might like to use this article as a sort of mini-manual. I have modified the selection from the original manual where necessary to make it more generic and applicable to any simulation game, not just to BARNGA.

Debriefing Phases

A debriefing is a time to reflect on and discover together what happened during game play and what it all means. Debriefings, even without a facilitator, usually move of their own power through the three phases of description, analogy/analysis, and application. However, even with a facilitator, participants are reluctant to move out of the first phase. One of your main jobs is to allot appropriate time to each phase.

In the description phase, participants gradually emerge from the game world — impelled to describe what happened to them. They need this chance to air their experiences and impressions, but also need to listen to the other participants and so be filled in on the whole picture.

In the analogy/analysis phase, participants systematically examine the simulation game model as just played and as designed, identifying and exploring parallels with real-world situations.

In the application phase, participants focus on the reality presented by the simulation game. They consider what understandings are particularly relevant to them and perhaps what courses of action they wish to carry out as a result of these understandings.

frequently skipped over. I hope they will let me list all those who over the last 20-plus years have taught me piece by piece about debriefing. I no longer remember just where I learned each piece, but I suspect that very little originated with me! Many thanks, in more or less chronological order, to Sandy Mumford Fowler, Steve Richardson, Eileen Broad, Ansell Horn, Len Suransky, Mitch Rycus, Terry Anderson, Fred Goodman, Al Feldt, Bob Parnes, Garry Shirts, Ron Stadskev, Wes Bjur, Cathy Greenblat, Michael Doyle, Michael Berney, and Thiagi, as well as to my students and workshop participants who provided a continuing practicum for testing and sharpening my understanding of the debriefing process.

Hints to Help You Facilitate

You are the only one giving full attention to *process*. Your job is not to lecture or expound, but to maximize idea development and group interchange. Concentrate on how best to encourage individuals to reflect on their experiences and articulate their perspectives so that the group can explore these understandings and learn from them.

It isn't easy to "make easy" (facilitate) for others. Here are some hints to make it easier for you to make learning easy for the participants.

Keep out of the substantive give and take for the most part. Avoid telling players what you think they should have learned. If they have not gleaned it from the experience, they probably will not learn it just because you say it. Respect the place they are at in their own lives, and believe that whatever they are learning at this time is valuable for them—even if different from your current insights.

Affirm everyone who contributes, perhaps by picking up and repeating, or better yet, stating your understanding of, a few key words just said, or by saying, "Say something more about. . . ." This will evoke a more in-depth response from someone tentatively voicing first thoughts.

If a question is working well, keep asking it over and over again, perhaps rephrasing it slightly each time.

Respect and use silences as spaces for thinking, absorbing. Be still, wait, and help them wait for each other.

Help those who tend to dominate be more sensitive to others' need to participate, and those who tend to withdraw to express and share. Do not be afraid to bring these situations up front in a nonjudgmental way; ask everyone to use their own group-facilitating skills to help out. Say, for example: "Would those of you who find it easy to dialogue in a group help me elicit a few comments from those we haven't heard from yet?" Or gently ask a direct question of someone whom you know has a unique experience to relate.

If someone questions the value of a comment or even of the activity itself, do not be threatened. Accept this, like any belief or opinion they have, as potential insight. Ask others what they think about what was just said.

Preliminary Considerations

Well in advance of your simulation gaming session, prepare for the debriefing by:

- Setting aside adequate time. The debriefing probably should run at least as long as the rest of the session put together.
- Identifying for yourself some analogies, relevant areas, or situations you can keep under your hat to bring up if necessary.
- Preparing a set of questions you can draw from to facilitate movement through the three phases of the debriefing. You will find a variety of suggested questions a little later in this article. Choose just a few most relevant to the purpose of your session, which you feel comfortable asking. Be sure to develop at least one question for each of the three phases.
- Making an outline you can work from during the debriefing. Take as much care as you gave to preparing for the play portion of your simulation game. Be sure to set aside adequate time for *each* of the three debriefing phases.

What if Your Group Is Large?

It is very difficult to have a good large group discussion with more than 20 or 25 persons. So what to do if you have 30 or more participants? Many games work well with such large groups, but how to handle the debriefing? You have three options.

First, you can divide the groups into several smaller groups with a facilitator for each. Each small group must convene in a separate room. This is not the preferred option since everyone won't be able to share all the experiences; some important puzzle pieces will be missing. Nevertheless, it will work quite well if you provide skilled facilitators for each room and if you send some from each of the original groups to one room, and some from each to another.

Second, use the "fishbowl" technique to make it possible for the entire group to participate in one discussion. Set up a circle with 10 to 20 chairs inside the larger debriefing circle. Recruit enough volunteers from the entire group to fill all the chairs except three in the inside circle (the fishbowl). Lead the debriefing only with this fishbowl group; others observe. Anyone from the larger observer group wishing to join in the discussion must fill one of the empty fishbowl chairs. Once the empty chairs are filled, anyone else from the outside circle wishing to join in should stand behind an occupied chair, and take that chair when it is vacated. Outside circle people can continually rotate through the "empty" chairs. This works well as long as discussion is strictly limited to those sitting in fishbowl chairs. The outside circle people listen more actively than observers usually do because they always have the option of occupying an empty inner circle chair and joining in the discussion. However, this is not the preferred option either because not everyone is able

to participate freely. Nevertheless, it has advantages over separating the group as in the first option above.

Third, use a combination of large-group and small-group discussions. This is the preferred option because it keeps everyone together to get the whole picture, while interspersing opportunities for small-group mini-discussions, thereby offering each individual ample opportunity to participate. The debriefing model presented below uses this third option.

If your group is large, decide for yourself which methods will best enable you and your group to debrief effectively.

As Play Ends, Prepare the Group for Debriefing

Help everyone withdraw from the experience and get ready to examine it together. Ask them to bring their game materials to a side table. This will help them begin to get out of the player role, and also help you get all the materials collected. Hold off giving a break at this time if at all possible. The momentum is such that debriefing will happen now no matter what you do. Because you want everyone to examine the experience together, keep the participants together — at least for the description phase of the debriefing.

Before Beginning the Debriefing, Form a Circle

After collecting the materials, ask everyone to move to the area of the room where you previously had set up a separate circle of chairs. If no such area is available, ask them to help push the tables back out of the way and move their chairs forward into a circle (or — but less desirable — move the chairs behind the tables so everyone is sitting more or less in a circle behind the tables). Sitting on the floor is an option if it is OK with everyone. Make sure the one circle will accommodate everyone, and ask the few who are hanging back and not sitting in the circle to move in.

Do not start until everyone is part of the same circle. Make the circle rather tight, with no empty “energy gap” spaces. This requires some effort but is worth it because it is virtually impossible to have good group dialogue if people are not part of one circle (or analogous configuration). They see each other then, and feel like one group. The “graphic” reality has symbolic strength.

Begin the Debriefing by Making a Few Opening Comments

After everyone is in a circle, explain what will be happening and ask for cooperation. Say something like the following:

- A debriefing is a time to discover together what happened and what it all means. Everyone who just played the game holds one piece of a giant puzzle. To know what the puzzle looks like, we must gather and examine all the pieces.
- We are going to have the unique opportunity to reflect together on a common experience we have just had. Usually, people have an experience but then go their separate ways without formally reflecting on it.
- Everyone should help make this discussion as rich as possible by using their group facilitating skills – that is, contribute ideas but leave time for others to do the same: listen to and learn from each other: help draw each other out.

Conduct an Instant Replay

Very briefly, recall the steps of play. Ask your participants to remember what was going through their minds and how they felt when you introduced the simulation game, when they first began to play, when the next steps occurred or when certain critical situations happened. If you videotaped selected moments of play, show the tape now. Your participants will love it and it will review the activity for them. Better yet, you could save the tape until after the descriptive phase and a short break are completed. They will see even more in it then.

Facilitate the Description Phase

Ask one or more of the following questions, balancing the need to move out of this phase in a reasonable amount of time with the need to go with the flow and be sensitive to whatever your participants are revealing and discovering.

- What happened in this game?
- What were your greatest frustrations and/or successes?
- What was the principal challenge? Did you overcome it?
- Did what you were thinking and feeling change during play?
- What decisions did you (or your group) make, and why? (If applicable, ask each group in turn.)

- What actions did you take? Then ask another person or group: What happened to you while they were doing that? What did you think they were doing?
- Then what happened?

Thiagi suggests saying the following:

- Before we get into a systematic analysis of our experiences, let's check out our feelings. During this activity, you might have experienced some strong anger, frustration, joy, sadness, or pride. If any of you would like to share your present feelings with the others, you are welcome to do so. But you don't have to, if you don't want to.

He suggests operationalizing this comment as follows:

- Give some quiet time for people to think about what they feel.
- If nobody volunteers, make an authentic affective statement.
- Provide sample statements from previous debriefings.
- Suggest that they try completing "I feel . . . because . . ."
- Listen attentively to the content and feeling of any statement.
- Listen empathetically by reflecting the speaker's emotions.
- Discourage any attempt to psychoanalyze the feelings.
- Ask for clarification of statements you do not understand, without appearing to trap the speaker.
- Keep calm. Do not become defensive.
- Thank the speaker for sharing the feelings.

If the simulation game makes use of any "gimmicks," remember that sometimes a few players will resent being manipulated. To defuse any latent resentment, raise the issue by asking if it was OK to have done this or that to them. Given the chance to talk about it, they usually will recognize its necessity.

Optional: Give a Break

This is a good time to give a short break. It will help everyone let go of their immediate reactions and make the transition to the more analytical part of the debriefing. If you do not give a break at this time, you will find it very difficult to get people to stop describing what happened.

The description phase often is easier to manage than the succeeding phases, so the temptation is strong to stay in it too long. Do not be afraid to

pull as hard as necessary in order to move your participants to the next phase. Too much description means too little analysis and application.

Facilitate the Analysis/Analogy Phase

Ask the following question, continuing to balance the need to structure the debriefing with the need to remain sensitive to the beat of your participants' drummers.

- We have mentioned several major issues (or situations or problems) that arose during play. What are some of them?

Optional: If your group is large, now is a good time to break into small groups of three to five persons each for mini-discussions. (This can be valuable even if your group is not very large.) Ask everyone to remain right where they are but to pull their chairs into several tight little circles. You might want to distribute copies of a discussion guidesheet. Allow 5 to 15 minutes for mini-discussions in the small groups. Then call them back to the large group to report their most important findings. Do not let them report everything! This is redundant and boring.

If you do form small groups, you can help people zero in more quickly by devising a different focal topic for each group, and letting the participants choose to join the group with the topic of their choice. They then will analyze and draw analogies from the perspective of their focal topic, and, when the large group reconvenes, will share insights from this same perspective. This will assure that the large-group reports will bring a certain richness to the discussion. Examples of some possible focal topics are: situations relating to management (or some other real-life application area), situations relating to workers (or another real-life application area), and situations relating to yet another real-life application area. Or, you might cut the deck of possible focal topics this way: communication, decision-making, understanding, and something else. Or, you can choose five or six key aspects of your game, and assign one to each small group.

Give the small groups two or three of the following questions, preferably on a guidesheet, to discuss. (If you choose not to form small groups, all of these questions can be used in the large group.)

- What specific real-life situations does this simulation game remind you of? Have you had any parallel real-life experiences? (You might mention in turn

several critical elements from the game including major roles, principal artifacts, key processes, key actions taken, etc.) Direct their responses to relate to your session purpose. If necessary, probe for more specific analogies, such as: Have you ever had an experience where . . . ? How did your view of things change once you became aware of it? In retrospect, how could you have handled the situation differently?

- Choose a couple of these situations. What are the underlying causes of the problems that they raise?
- What does the game experience suggest about what to do when you are in a real-life situation like this? Try to remember what you did during the game that “worked.”
- What does _____ mean? Fill in the blank with a key concept or reality that is at the heart of what the experience simulates.
- What was missing from this simulation game? Who/what else must you deal with in real life that was not simulated here?

After the small groups have met and after they have made their brief reports in the large group, you may want to discuss (in the large group) two or three additional questions from the above list.

Facilitate the Application Phase

Ask some or all of the following questions, still continuing to balance the need to structure the debriefing with the need to move along the road the participants may be taking.

- What will be your next important real-life experience where you might apply your learnings from this game? What experiences do you want to have in that situation?
- What can you do to increase the probability of having such experiences?
- What is the single most important principle you learned from the game experience today? You might ask any who wish to respond to this question in a go-round fashion as a closure device. (Alternatively, you might ask your participants to complete this statement, as Garry Shirts frequently suggests: Anyone playing this game would probably learn)

Optional: Question to Add if Participants Are Likely to Conduct the Game Themselves

If one of the purposes of your session is to help others learn to conduct the game, also assign the following task. You might want to have people

discuss it first in small groups and then report their important findings to the whole group.

- Suggest any actual specific group program or gathering for which you have some responsibility where this simulation game might help you accomplish your objectives.

As they discuss this, it will illuminate for them the game's potential, and also raise questions they might have about how to run the game effectively for their own groups.

End Session or Make Transition to Next Portion of a Larger Program

The preceding debriefing questions can serve as an excellent closure device, or you may wish to end in some other manner—perhaps with a brief ceremony or ritual devised by you and/or the participants.

Reference

Thiagarajan, S., & Steinwachs, B. (1990). *BARNGA: A Simulation Game on Cultural Clashes*. A SIETAR International Publication. Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press.

Barbara Steinwachs consults in the use and design of simulation games and other interactive group methods for organizational planning, education and training, and program development. She counts among the milestones of her life the first simulation game she ever played in the late 1960s, and the opportunity to work full time with simulation gaming professionals at the University of Michigan in the middle 1970s. Her ongoing search is for ways to make group planning and learning more participative and experiential. She does her creative work in the woods on the bluff of Keuka Lake in the wine country of upstate New York. She is Game Review Editor of this journal.

ADDRESS: *risingmoon, Keuka Lake, 1128 East Bluff Drive, Penn Yan, NY 14527, USA; phone and fax 315-536-7895.*