A guide to team briefing

Introduction

When an organisation sets up a networked care model, its workforce will be more dispersed than previously and more work will be required to ensure that everyone feels connected to everyone else. If a team briefing system is not already in place, this is an ideal time to set one up.

Team briefing is a powerful tool to help leaders deliver on their objectives by ensuring that everyone in the organisation knows what it is trying to achieve and the part that individuals play.

Pioneered many years ago by the Industrial Society, it should involve the whole organisation, from the top down, briefing all team leaders who, in turn, brief their own teams. The principles behind it are:

- People are unlikely to co-operate fully unless they understand what is happening.

- The best way to bond a group of people into a team is to talk to them as a team about things which affect them all.

- Communications should be two way.

Research shows that face-to-face communication between line managers and their teams is essential to the effective operation of an organisation and this lies at the heart of a team brief. In most organisations, "top down" and "bottom up" communications work quite well but much gets stuck in the middle. Team brief facilitates communication up and down the structure of an organisation at all levels.

It should convey strategic and operational information, gain feedback and answer questions. It should ensure that staff receive information that is relevant to them, usually a mixture or corporate and local issues, and that they can provide feedback. The system should be monitored to ensure it is being used, that questions receive answers and that the themes of general feedback are captured.

Team brief is not meant to replace normal day-to-day communications between team leaders and staff and these should continue as normal, or if they are not happening, start doing so.

Benefits of team briefing

- It provides a channel for delivering clear messages and encouraging feedback.

- Timely face-to-face communication prevents rumours gaining credibility.

- It makes communication two way.

- It develops greater awareness in managers, enabling them to spot potential hurdles.

- It develops a shared sense of mission and objectives – the "why we're here".

- It helps staff at all levels to feel valued.

A suggested process

Each month at a meeting of the management executive team, the chief executive and the rest of the executive team should agree a core brief comprising messages that all staff need to know. A draft can be prepared by the communications team based on responses to an email request for content sent to executives the previous week and liaison with the chief executive.

The chief executive will deliver the briefing at whichever site s/he is scheduled to be at that month. It will be necessary to appoint a series of deputies to do it in the event that the chief executive is unavailable. This is essential if the timetable suggested below is to be maintained as staff will have meetings set up to allow onward briefing and any delay in starting the process will risk missing these meetings.

Members of the executive pass on these key messages to their "next in line", adding local messages as appropriate. These managers then brief their own staff, again making them more relevant to local teams as necessary. The process continues until everyone is briefed.

It is important to have a short timescale within which this process is completed so that one month's briefing does not run into the next. A week is optimal, but it takes dedication on the part of the team leaders to achieve.

It is strongly recommended that the core brief is not placed on the intranet until after the round of briefing meetings has taken place. This is because of the great body of evidence which shows that face-to-face communications are valued most by staff. If the brief is available on the intranet, it is likely that it will often be circulated electronically.

Monitoring

It will be essential to check that the cascade is effective and that any blockages in the system are identified and remedied. This can be done with a survey sent by the communications team to a random selection of staff. The results can be sent to the appropriate directors. The system can be further evaluated with local questions in the annual national staff survey.

Core brief

This is best kept as brief as possible to allow space and time to add local messages which for many staff will be more immediately relevant. It is a good idea to organise them around the corporate objectives to reinforce their relevance to everyone's daily role.

To ensure the brief is relevant and succinct, it will be important to ensure that each message is:

- **relevant to everyone** working at the organisation (local messages can be added further down the cascade)

- **concise and jargon free** (new staff will not necessarily understand special terms)
- **timely**

…and includes a signpost to **more information.**

Local brief

This gives managers an opportunity to add messages directly relevant to their staff to the brief. Again, the above criteria must be followed to ensure the message is relevant to everyone in the directorate/department/team, depending at which stage the briefing is being done.

The briefing cycle

Managers should always aim to deliver the brief face-to-face so that any questions arising from the core brief can be discussed and feedback gathered for feeding back up the chain. As discussed above, the brief should not be circulated by email during the first week of the cycle but placed on the intranet after that by the communications team.

It is suggested that 15 minutes is allowed in the team meeting for this item. To ensure the briefing cycle is completed by the following week, special meetings may be necessary. If this is the case, colleagues may wish to consider re-scheduling regular meetings to accommodate the process.

The process in more detail:

Manager A briefs manager B, giving him/her a hard copy of both the core brief and any local brief. Manager B should ensure s/he is clear about the messages so s/he's prepared for any questions.

Following this meeting, manager B holds a meeting with his/her staff, presenting both briefs plus any local brief s/he has. Again, those expected to brief onwards must be given hard copies of the brief (s) and should note any issues of particular relevance for their staff. Other staff do not need a hard copy. It will be important that the line managers ensure that they have understood the brief sufficiently well to make it meaningful for their direct reports.

The process continues until all staff are briefed. By then there may be three or four briefs, increasingly local in focus, so it's essential that all are brief and point to more information where appropriate, for instance particular colleague or a document on the intranet.

The core brief can be placed on the intranet by the communications team a week after the core brief is produced. This would be for reference only and is not to be used as a substitute for face-to-face meetings.

At every level of the chain, from the chief executive to the most local briefer, arrangements must be made for when regular briefers are away in order to adhere to the timetable.

Feedback

The process is designed to ensure that line managers are able to tackle most questions they are asked by their staff on matters covered by the brief. However, any that they can't answer should be referred to the person named in the brief. If this person is unavailable, the communications team can be asked to find an appropriate person to provide the answer.

General feedback will also be very useful and can be organised into general themes and fed back to the communications team to summarise for the management executive and/or the board.

Who briefs?

Briefers are usually those with line management responsibility for staff but where a manager has fewer than four staff they could join their manager when s/he is being briefed, or they could join another briefing group. Where managers are part-time and not available during the relevant period, they should find other managers who will agree to brief their teams.

Visibility of senior leaders

In a trust with a large number of sites, the chief executive will not be able to appear in person each month, but other executives can step in, increasingly their own visibility and, if they wish, developing a long-term relationship with particular sites, improving the "board to ward" line of sight and ensuring that staff at all locations feel connected to the leadership.