

The Importance of Debriefing Events

WRITER
MARIE
HERMAN

Don't reinvent the wheel – build upon past successes says Marie Herman

There are many important steps in project management, but there's one particularly important step for administrative professionals that is sometimes overlooked. This step is the process of debriefing the event after it is completed. We are often responsible for events and projects that get repeated annually. Unfortunately, all too often committees reinvent the wheel every year instead of building upon past successes and improving where they fell short previously. A large part of the reason for this is the lack of debriefing following events and transitioning those notes to the future committees.

Debriefing Starts DURING Your Event

The process of debriefing starts DURING the event. Before your event is over, take time to walk around the room and jot down notes. I carry a notepad with me during any events I host and I jot down every thought I want to remember, as it's far too easy for thoughts to be forgotten in the middle of hectic events. Then I sit down at the end of the event (before I start packing up/breaking down) and jot down some additional thoughts. Do NOT rely on your memory to catch them all later. Questions to ask yourself include:

- Approximately how many people attended?
 - What percentage were male versus female?
 - What factors influenced people attending?
- For instance, my company implemented a flex work schedule where many employees no longer work on Fridays. This impacts attendance of events on that day. Other influences could be illness during flu season, conferences, fiscal year end closing, office moves, lack of interest in the event, lack of supervisor approval to attend, etc.
- How much food (or other consumable items) were purchased and how much was left over? Make specific notes, such as 1 of 5 cases of coke, 2 of 5 cases of diet coke, 1.5 of 4 cases of bottled water left over. Before people start packing up the leftovers, note what foods were empty that might need to be increased in quantity the following year or what had



large amounts remaining that could possibly be reduced. You can determine later what you consider an acceptable or even desirable overage versus what is excessive.

- What worked well? What do I want to repeat next year? Examples might be noting that a new table layout worked well, that the signage was large enough to read, that the catering vendor was responsive, etc.
- Where were the bottlenecks or problems? How can I prevent those next year? Examples might include the number of waste containers, separation of waste and recycling, insufficient hangers for storage of coats during cold weather,

lack of signage, necessity for backup plan for outdoor events in the case of bad weather, etc.

- Note the timeline, not only of the event overall (how far in advance of the event to hold the first committee meeting, etc.), but also of specific milestones and action items. Examples could include pick up frozen chicken breasts 2-3 days in advance to give them time to thaw, start the charcoal approximately two hours prior to serving to have sufficient time to cook food.
- Correlate the work completed with the volunteers/staffing and note if any changes need to be made in future. Did you have too many people for cleanup and not enough for

setup? Did you need an extra person to man the grill? Did you need an extra person to be available for errands on the day of or to assist with unloading the day before?

- Create a drawing of the room and table layout, marking exactly what was put on each table, including order and quantities (For example, condiments on tables #1, set up for double sided serving, ketchup (2 squeeze bottles), mustard (2 squeeze bottles), relish (1 jar with knife or spoon, and so on).

Don't Forget Follow-up Actions

You'll want to take care of any follow-up actions, such as:

- Restore the room to the condition you found it in.
- See that additional chairs or tables are removed and returned to their proper location
- Clean up any papers and materials left in the room. Notify the cleaning staff if room needs additional care.
- Issue minutes or final reports.
- Return any items that were borrowed.
- For items being stored for the following year, make a note in the files of where they are being stored, and quantities remaining (especially if disposable like charcoal, aluminum foil, etc.)
- Review all invoices for accuracy.
- Send out any thank your notes or other follow up messages as needed (to committee



members, speakers, supplementary staff such as AV or custodial staff.

Hold a Debriefing Session

After your event, you'll want to do an overall debriefing evaluation of the meeting, looking at as many areas as possible. With smaller events, a formal evaluation might be unnecessary, but an informal evaluation by at least the leader and perhaps the entire team could still prove useful.

Some of the overall questions to be considered would include:

- Did we achieve our objective?
- Did all members of the committee/organizing group participate fully?
- Were there any internal issues that will need to be addressed in future years?
- In what ways could we better handle any issues that arose?
- Was our notetaking and minute taking sufficient?
- Review all areas of the event – marketing materials, parking, signage, room layout, waste management, traffic flow, volunteer/staffing, etc.

- Update all dates in your tracking spreadsheet, especially noting things that took longer than expected to complete.
- Keep notes on meetings long enough to refer to them when planning the next similar meeting. You might also keep names and telephone numbers of contact people. Your notes will help with future meetings.

Implement Improvements

Then we need to look ahead to how we can make improvements in future years.

- Capture the shopping list for any food, decorations, etc. purchased (including quantities and any special notes like gluten free or vegetarian options).
- Record all costs to finalize the budget.
- Write down any ideas for future event themes.
- Write out step by step instructions for volunteer roles so they require less supervision in the future.
- Identify any checklists you can create that will help
- Create a final “lessons learned/things I want to do differently next time” list for future events. Taking time to identify what could be improved means your event will get closer and closer to flawless every year. For example, I moved my condiments for my barbecue to a separate table when I identified they were creating a bottleneck in the food serving line. However, the second year, I recognized that this simply moved the bottleneck farther down the line, but didn't eliminate it. The following year I added a second condiment table and doubled all the condiments, which helped tremendously in keeping the line moving. Continuous evaluation and implementation of improvements is what has helped to make this part of the event more efficient.

By taking time AFTER the event to capture your notes and thoughts, your events will improve every year and you'll be the office hero we already know that you are! In addition, if it becomes necessary to transition your event to someone else, you'll be setting them up for success by having everything documented and clearly spelled out.



about the author



Marie Herman CAP-OM, ACS operates a successful business, MRH Enterprises (www.mrbenterprises.com), whose services include teaching computer and other classes in-person and via the internet, writing articles, and conducting workshops and other speaking engagements. She leads study groups for IAAP's Certified Administrative Professional (CAP) exam and the Microsoft Office Specialist certifications. She can be reached at execsecmagazine@mrbenterprises.com.

