

PLANNER'S WORKSHOP

education

➔ How to use fighter pilot techniques to execute better meetings

The Feedback Loop

By Anthony "AB" Bourke

You might be surprised to know that meeting planners and F-16 fighter pilots have much in common. Both operate at Mach 2 (twice the speed of sound) in high-stress, rapidly changing environments. Pilots lead missions and planners lead meetings where they constantly encounter people ready to shoot them down for the smallest mistake. Both rely on "wingmen" to keep them in the air, and both know that their roles in successful missions are likely to go unnoticed, but that a slight error or oversight could have devastating consequences.

Since change is a constant in the world of aerial combat, fighter pilots have developed a cadence, or rhythm, that ensures peak performance every time they fly. It drives a continuous culture of improvement. This model is known as the "Feedback Loop." Built on a solid foundation of training, the Feedback Loop mandates that pilots conduct a briefing immediately prior to every mission to ensure that all wingmen are aligned and flying in formation. The Feedback Loop also requires a debrief immediately following any missions to make sure that fighter pilots learn from their victories as well as their mistakes and improve every single day. This series of articles (the second appears in the January 2014 issue) will show you how these two criti-



cal steps will help you bring more control and sanity to the otherwise insane world that we call meeting planning.

The Briefing

There is a famous saying among fighter pilots that states: "As goes the briefing, so goes the mission." For meeting planners,

this could translate to "as goes the briefing, so goes the meeting, so goes the day, and so goes the week."

The concept of briefing is quite simple. It suggests that you may be the best and the brightest meeting planner in the world, with rock-solid plans of how to put on a world-class event, but if you haven't found a way to

FEATURES PREVIEW

20

For holiday teambuilding, few activities are as fun and delicious as making gingerbread houses

24

Tiki Barber and other sports experts offer strategies for how to give your meeting a competitive advantage

33

Regional casinos are proliferating throughout the country — learn how to make them work for your meeting

communicate your perfect plans to your team and to your client, you'll be flying solo, and so will your people. That's why pilots always conduct a clear, concise briefing just before mission execution to ensure that when they jump into their jets and start their engines, they are aligned, flying in formation, and executing at the highest possible level.

For many planners, there is often a misperception of what constitutes an effective briefing. To help clarify, let's start by looking at a few things that a briefing is not.

- A briefing is not a planning session. By the time the briefing occurs, the plan has been thoroughly reviewed and approved, and now it's time to execute.

- A briefing is not a two-way conversation. In fact, a briefing is one-way communication from a leader to her team that lays out the roles that everyone will play in putting on a successful event. Think of a quarterback calling the play to his teammates in a huddle.

- A briefing is never interrupted by questions. Questions are important, but they are held until the end of the briefing. This is purely a matter of efficiency. Even a well-thought-out question can veer a briefing off onto a tangent and turn a 15-minute brief into a 45-minute discussion. Fighter pilots can't afford these time slips and neither can you.

A briefing is simply an opportunity for leaders to lay out the exact objectives and tactics for the mission and the roles he expects his wingmen/colleagues to play in achieving those objectives. The information is conveyed in a clear, concise manner, using a checklist or briefing guide so that the information flows in a manner that everyone expects and no elements are overlooked. Briefing is the

time when preparation stops and execution starts.

Many planners use some form of briefing every day in their offices and before every meeting or event. While many planners are using this system, there is a great opportunity to make their briefings more efficient and effective, ultimately driving better results. Here are some guidelines for conducting a briefing:

- **Have one leader.** One person is ultimately responsible for the success of your meetings. Fighter pilots call this person the flight lead. While this person is rarely the senior ranking person, he or she has conducted all of the planning, is most current on the "threats," and has solicited input from the other flight members prior to the brief to ensure he has developed the best plan. The flight lead conducts the briefing and everyone else in the formation, even a two-star general, plays the role of wingman.

Unless the flight lead briefs the group on a plan that will either run them out of gas or get them killed, now is not the time to question or undermine the leader's plan. Now is time to execute and be the best wingman you can be. Once the mission is complete and it's time for a debrief, that is when our general or anyone else in the formation may choose to share thoughts and techniques — both positive and negative — to help both the individuals and the team improve their performance.

In your business as a planner, you have the same dynamic. Sometimes the president or owner of a company leads the mission, but often one of your planners has been designated to run the meeting and take the lead. The meeting flight lead's job is to solicit input from wingmen during the planning stages and



THE BRIEFING STARTS NOW — PUNCTUALITY SETS THE TONE

How do you get a group of busy professionals into a room all at the same time for a meeting? If six people wait 10 minutes for a seventh person to get off the phone, an hour of otherwise productive time goes up the chimney. Worse yet, habitual accommodation of latecomers can create a wasteful culture of "whenever." It may even prompt attendees to believe they have tacit permission to wander off and attend to other tasks.

Here are some practical tips to ensure punctuality for your meetings:

- **Set the standard.** As team leader, you need to arrive early, set up the room, and be ready to roll at precisely the designated hour. Create a standard that arriving five minutes early is on time and one second past start time is late.

- **At the specified time, close the door**

and begin the meeting. Thank those who have shown up for respecting your time. Assure them that you will show equal respect for theirs by not exceeding your allotted time. Designate "a wingman" to help keep you on time, by letting you know when it gets to five or 10 minutes before the official start time.

- **Once you've developed a standard for punctuality, make an impact if people show up late.** If you lack a quorum at the appointed time, reschedule the event for the following morning, noting that prompt attendance is required. You obviously don't want to start this practice on launch day of a major client event. Test drive it in a low-risk environment such as the Monday morning operations meeting. Repeat as needed until punctuality becomes a company-wide standard.



develop the best possible plan for the client. But once the planning is done and the execution begins, the flight lead's job is to clearly communicate that plan to the team so that everyone can execute it to the best of their abilities.

- Briefings always start and end on time. Set a tone with your team that timing matters. Don't forget that "as goes the briefing so goes the meeting." (Please see the sidebar, "The Briefing Starts Now.")

- Develop standards for the way you conduct your meetings. For example, you might always brief 90 minutes prior to the first scheduled event of the day and debrief 30 minutes after the last event of the day. Build a standardized briefing guide that you can use at every one of your meetings to ensure that when you do share your plans with your people, the information flows in a manner they expect and that no details are overlooked. Standardizing the timing of briefs and debriefs will help everyone know when and where they need to be to start and finish their day. While this concept may seem overly rigid to some, consistent scheduling establishes a regular business cadence or rhythm that will allow your team more time to focus on important issues like putting on a world-class event and less time reinventing the wheel when

they get together.

- Attendance is mandatory. Pilots unable to attend a briefing or debriefing are scrubbed from the mission. This is not a reflection on their character, their work habits, or their devotion to duty. This is driven by the team's need to execute missions with the utmost precision, focus, and safety. The same standard should apply to business briefings. A person unable to attend a final briefing should be replaced by a colleague who can. That way, the entire team knows what is expected of each player at each minute in the timeline.

Successful meetings and events always start with great leadership. A carefully constructed and well-delivered briefing is the best way to communicate your plans to your team, and vastly increases the likelihood of a satisfied client and a world-class meeting. Keep this piece of wisdom in mind: As goes the briefing, so goes the meeting. **SM**

Anthony "AB" Bourke is the CEO and founder of Mach 2 Consulting, a global management training firm. He is also a highly experienced F-16 fighter pilot who has accumulated more than 2,700 hours of flight time. In the January 2014 issue, he'll show you how to apply the same five steps that pilots use to conduct an effective briefing

Reader ROI

- Neither a brainstorm nor a planning session, a briefing is a one-way communication focused on the granular details of execution. Think of a quarterback calling the play to his teammates in a huddle.
- Held at a "standard" time before an event or each week in your office, briefings start and end on time. Attendance is mandatory for event participants.
- Briefings cover the big-picture scenario, a list of measurable objectives, the logistics, the rules and responsibilities, and the risks that may be encountered.
- Developing a regular cadence of briefings and debriefings around key meetings and events will drive better results, accelerate the experience of your people, and help you become a more effective leader.

