

About BRIEF: Q&A with Author Joe McCormack

1. What is BRIEF about?

- ▶ It's about the value of less in an attention economy. People that get to the point quickly provide instant relief and come out on top.

2. Where did you get the idea for BRIEF?

- ▶ Years of seeing professionals and military leaders try and fail to communicate important ideas with so much energy and so little success. People want to get to the essence of the matter and brevity is their weapon.

3. The book is called BRIEF but it is over 200 pages – what gives?

- ▶ I got paid by the word – it's a long story. No, really, the reason is that I needed to go beyond the obvious and create a permanent shift. Not easy. BRIEF is divided into four sections – why, how, where and what's next – that provide practical insights and relatable anecdotes.

4. What do you hope readers will take away from the book?

- ▶ First, that brevity is for them; that it's not somebody else's problem. Second, that they understand why it's a pressing issue. And third, there's something practical they can do right now to get better.

5. What does BRIEF stand for?

- ▶ It's a methodology that stands for background (B), relevance (R), information (I), ending (E) and follow up (F). These are the keys to create a clear and memorable briefing.

6. Do you actually use this stuff yourself?

- ▶ Every day. I take a few moments to prepare before running a meeting, sending an e-mail, providing an update or getting on the phone.

7. How did your work with the military inform and influence the book?

- ▶ I was first invited to share narrative messaging techniques as an essential part of a professional development program I provided to prepare the chief military spokesperson to run media briefings at Central Command in Iraq. Later, an element of U.S. Special Operations asked me to prepare their organization to improve how they efficiently and effectively share sensitive information and conduct mission briefings.

8. What struggles do corporate and military leadership have in common?

- ▶ They all have a hard time simplifying things that are highly complex and communicating in environments where people are inattentive, interrupted, impatient and buried with information. In both cases, less is more when there's a vital message that needs to be delivered.

9. The principles in BRIEF probably don't apply to auctioneers or mimes; whom do they apply to?

- ▶ Nearly everyone else, except shy people.

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10. BRIEF is full of anecdotes of people's success and failures at applying the principles of brevity. Can you give an example of a BRIEF home run and a BRIEF disaster?

- ▶ In the book, I share many examples of unfortunate disasters, for example when people get too comfortable during an interview and talk their way out of a job that was clearly theirs to get. I also showcase triumphs when being succinct made an immediate impact; for instance, when a boss had some tough criticism for a subordinate but gave it to him straight and didn't drone on mercilessly for an hour. Stories like this happen to us every day and make the topic relevant.

11. How does your work at The BRIEF Lab tie into the concepts in BRIEF?

- ▶ The BRIEF Lab is for small teams of executives to discover how to master brevity and create a noticeable shift within their organizations. It starts at the top. We use all of the techniques from the book and create practical exercises for them to make the issue real and tangible.

12. Explain the concept of a "controlled conversation."

- ▶ We all run across people that are long-winded and verbally lazy. Talking with them can be endless and painful. Controlling the conversation means asking better questions, directing the flow and not letting the topic get out of hand.

13. Why is a narrative so powerful in business communications?

- ▶ Professionals love stories because they are rare instances of clarity and brevity. Converting mounds of seemingly meaningless information into a narrative ensures that your audience is interested and engaged every step of the way.

14. What advice can you offer to people who want to communicate more effectively?

- ▶ Take time to prepare. This means knowing what to leave out – and in – while being super aware that people can't pay attention forever. Brevity is being disciplined and decisive. The payoff is immediate.

15. Can you be too brief?

- ▶ Yes [pause, awkward laughter]. Brevity sits between the blunt, one-word answer (e.g., How was your vacation? Fine.) and the long-winded, never-ending version (e.g., How was your vacation? Let me replay every day of it for you). It balances being clear, concise and compelling.

16. Who needs this the most?

- ▶ Any professional that wants to stand out, starting with leaders who want to get more done.

17. How can you help your boss or a client say less?

- ▶ Start by being a better listener with them. Many people repeat themselves because they feel they're not heard. Also, you can play back what they say as an indication that they're lengthy explanation has made it through – that'll show them they've said enough. Finally, by preparing what you need to say in advance so it's tight and right the first time and keeps it a conversation, not a management monologue.