

# [brief]

make a bigger impact  
by saying less ◀

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WILEY

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*This is dedicated to Julie, my beloved wife.  
Thank you for loving me and inspiring me every day.  
Your presence in my life is a great gift.*

# Foreword

When Joe asked me to write the foreword, I was literally in the middle of wrapping up my own book (*Scaling Up*) and I thought I couldn't do it.

I wanted to do something special (and brief!) and you know how hard it is to say something brief. Then, I changed my mind.

Read the book.

You're busy; we all are.

Be a master of brevity. Now get started.

—Verne Harnish, Founder and CEO of Gazelles

# Acknowledgments

When I first told my kids that I was writing a book called *BRIEF*, the jokes started flying. You could only imagine their comments. My friends and extended family followed suit saying the book should be only 10 pages long.

Funny...I'm still laughing.

All kidding aside, I want to thank all of them for their constant love and support. It has been wonderful to see their nonstop encouragement.

As for my coworkers, clients, and close collaborators, this book has given me a unique opportunity to have deeper conversations and start to dream with them about the possibilities of a “less is more” world. On many occasions, they have taken time from their day job to lend me a hand. In particular, Johnny, Angelo, Angela, and Megan have been invaluable to get *BRIEF* airborne.

There are a few people, Meghan and Joyce at Sheffield and Christine Moore at John Wiley & Sons, whom I have depended on throughout with an honest editorial push to omit needless words and make this a better book.

Regarding my current and former clients, I have shared their insights, commentary, successes, and failures all while respecting their confidentiality and excluding any sensitive information they have shared with me. In particular, I have changed some first names and omitted surnames of those serving in our country's Special Operations community.

Finally, for all of those that I have interviewed for this book—a heartfelt thank you. Truly, this is a topic that affects us all.

# Preface

## Why BRIEF?

In our attention-deficit economy, being brief is what's desperately needed and rarely delivered.

When we fail to be clear and concise, the consequences can be brutal: wasted time, money, and resources; decisions made in confusion; worthy ideas rejected; people sent off in wrong directions; done deals that always seem to stall.

As the founder of a boutique marketing agency that helps clients such as Harley-Davidson, BMO Harris Bank, MasterCard, and W. W. Grainger get their stories straight, I know this is a rare skill.

For years, business and military leaders have complained to me about the same things. Mixed messages keep missing the mark. People are not on the same page. Long-winded presentations go nowhere.

For businesses to succeed in an information-laden and hyperbusy economy, the rambling has to stop. So I decided to write BRIEF, a step-by-step approach to get to the point quickly.

Anyone can learn how to make what's complex clear. After my firm was in business for just a few years, I was invited to develop an original curriculum for U.S. Special Operations Command in Fort Bragg, North Carolina. It turned out that some of the most elite members of our military were weak communicators. They admitted their mission-critical briefs were painfully long, buried in details, and impossible to decipher.

The transformative work with Special Operations was—and still is—incredibly rewarding. That's how BRIEF was born. It's about lean communication. It's like Six Sigma for your mouth.



After a few days in our Narrative Mapping courses, I saw an immediate shift. They were able to leverage storytelling skills and BRIEF techniques to be clear and compelling when explaining complex missions. They delivered complicated information efficiently and effectively, with clearer context and more compelling explanations. They used fewer PowerPoint presentations. As a result, the leaders fostered better and more engaging conversations.

One of the participants commented, “The difference is dramatic. Our briefs can prove that less is more.”

I believe the lessons learned with U.S. Special Operations can be used in the corporate world by those who want to be concise and clear when sharing their story.

You're busy, so I've designed the book to be immediately useful. If you read and follow along actively, you will learn to create clarity and meaning and drive out waste and confusion.

The book is organized around a new form of ADD: awareness, discipline, and decisiveness.

*Part One: Awareness*—the conviction to hold yourself and others to a higher standard of succinctness

*Part Two: Discipline*—the BRIEF approach to producing the mental muscle memory necessary to make you a lean communicator every time

*Part Three: Decisiveness*—the ability to recognize key moments when you need to convey what really matters effectively and efficiently

*Brevity is a choice.*

When you want to get more, decide to say less. Those who want to succeed—even thrive—in an attention-deficit economy are masters of lean communication. They stand out, their ideas are seen and heard, and their companies succeed. Decide that being brief is your non-negotiable standard.






As I have seen firsthand, BRIEF tackles an issue that won't go away unless we become lean communicators and let our ideas stand out.

Are you ready?

This won't take long.

# [brief]

## HOW THE BOOK IS ORGANIZED

PART	INTRO	I	II	III	IV
QUESTION	WHY?	WHY NOW?	HOW?	WHEN/ WHERE?	WHAT'S NEXT?
TITLE	Why BRIEF and the New ADD	Heightened Awareness in a World Begging for BRIEF	How to Gain Discipline to be Clear and Concise	Gaining the Decisiveness to Know When and Where to be BRIEF	Being BRIEF: Summary and Action Plan
IN SIX WORDS	Discover BRIEF's main premise and promise	Feed world hunger for the point	Techniques to be clear and concise	Times to deliver "less is more"	Live it daily or lose it
THE GIST	Author's short story behind the birth of BRIEF and what every reader should expect	Flooded with information, interruptions, and inattentiveness, people are begging for less	Handful of practical approaches to develop the muscle to manage people's attention and stand out	Knowing and navigating the key moments when and where to use lean communication to make an impact	Series of practical insights and challenges to ensure you sustain the skill over time
YOUR FEELING	 Curious		 Captivated		 Committed
BOTTOM LINE	The new, non-negotiable standard in business	A brutal concern and a prerequisite for success today	There's hope for all types of people to tighten up their game	There's a time and place for the "less is more" mandate	Tips to ensure your BRIEF muscle gets in shape and stays that way

## HOW TO READ THIS BOOK

**BRIEF** was deliberately designed to be easy to read and immediately useful. To this end, we've added multiple recurring features and visual elements that quickly grasp the book's benefits.



- **BRIEF BITS**—These short sections offer memorable insights on how to be BRIEF. The military figure accompanying each of them is a reminder that we have to take a more disciplined, mindful approach to be sure we're always clear and concise.



- **BRIEF BASICS**—This handful of critical techniques are essential to being BRIEF. A solid understanding of these BRIEF BASICS is key to being a lean communicator.



- **EXECUTIVE ATTENTION**—Meet two modern executives whose lives are impacted by other people's inability to be BRIEF. Each scene depicts the problems they face and how brevity can turn things around.

# Part One

## Awareness

Heightened Awareness in a  
World Begging for BRIEF

# Chapter 1

## Why Brevity Is Vital

**Long story, short.** Executives are busy, and your rambling presentation gets lost in their daily flood of information.

## Get to the Point or Pay the Price

You cannot afford to miss the boat on brevity. It's the difference between success and failure. And if you think you've already got it covered, you're wrong.

I've spoken with hundreds of leaders and executives over 20 years and heard countless stories about how someone's inability to get to the point quickly spelled disaster. The dysfunction is real, immediate, and lasting.

Here are a few examples.

- *General dismissal:* A field-grade Army officer uses a series of PowerPoint slides to deliver a brief to his superiors on a recommended strategic course of action. He watches his presentation unravel as a high-ranking general obsessed with details spends the entire time feverishly highlighting every single typographical error on the handout. The officer lost his audience in the minutiae.
- *A rising star stalls:* A brilliant young woman who looks as if she is right out of Central Casting—bright, talented, and attractive—is widely recognized by senior leadership as the future go-to person. Her fatal flaw is well known,

however: She cannot close big deals because she cannot shut up. Her motormouth bars her from any client-facing assignments.

- *Done deal comes undone:* After closing a \$500,000 contract with a new client, a sales executive is shocked to discover that his overenthusiastic support person has followed up with the client and explained all the reasons why he thinks they've purchased way more technology than they need. The verbal misstep drops the deal by \$200,000.
- *98-pager delivered:* A vice president of communications who's frantically looking for a simple, one-page product summary for a big press release discovers that the best her organization can deliver is a mega PowerPoint file with nearly 100 slides. It chokes her e-mail inbox and kills the story.
- *Hero's story overlooked:* A police detective takes the initiative to recognize a fellow officer's generosity and impact with disabled athletes by pitching his feel-good story to a major magazine. A reporter speaks to the detective, who unfortunately cannot quickly sum up his pitch and rambles on. The reporter becomes too confused and doesn't run the story.
- *Luncheon leaves a bad taste:* Three hundred busy executives attend a fundraiser for a nonprofit organization during their busy workweek. The keynote speaker is slotted 20 minutes after the meal. He blows far beyond the allotted time, and after nearly an hour, the room is half empty and the feel-good charity loses its appeal.

You get the point. Today's world is on information overload, and there isn't enough time to sift through all the messages. If you can't capture people's attention and deliver your message with brevity, you'll lose them.

# Executive—Interrupted

I once met an executive named Ed who was a lot like many business leaders nowadays—easily distracted.

“I've got way too much going on in my life and in my head,” he lamented. “It seems like my mind is under constant assault throughout the day. There are nonstop e-mails, meetings, calls, interruptions, and information,” he explained. “It's taxing.”

Ed continued, “A few weeks ago. I had a really important meeting with a small agency about the launch of a new advertising campaign targeting younger buyers. It's tough reaching that segment and getting their attention, so I was really interested to see their strategies, timelines, and plans.”

Even though Ed disliked meetings, his interest in the topic had him surprisingly geared up. But when I asked how the meeting went, he replied, “We had an hour scheduled. They assured me their PowerPoint was only a few slides, but they were pretty densely packed with research and recommendations. Although they kept the slide count down, they jammed every inch they could.”

“They were probably trying to keep it short and to the point for you. But it sounds like there was way too much to cover,” I said.

“And that wasn't even half the problem,” Ed said. “About 5 minutes into the meeting, I feel my phone go off in my pocket. False alarm—you know, one of those phantom rings when your leg vibrates and the phone's not even there when you check. I eventually found it in my bag—and by then, I'd already been digging around for it and not really paying attention to their presentation.”



## THE ELUSIVE 600: MANAGING EXCESS MENTAL BANDWIDTH

*People speak about 150 words per minute, yet have the approximate mental capacity to consume about five times that number, or 750 words per minute.*

You're having a conversation with some old friends at a college reunion, and they start talking about some hilarious memories. While they're recounting your exploits, your mind immediately **races** to an incident from your senior year with an old flame. You recall in vivid detail how painful it was when you ended the relationship. You imagine the entire break up scene while listening to and laughing with your buddies **at the same time**. Two separate conversations run through your mind simultaneously.

This phenomenon of thinking about one thing while listening to and engaging in a conversation about another is called **the Elusive 600**—and it's always at work. Here's how it happens:

People speak about 150 words per minute, yet they have the approximate mental capacity to consume about five times that number—750 words per minute. So while someone is speaking, you have **600 extra words per minute** to think other thoughts. Your mind's spare bandwidth is always present when you're speaking or listening. This is the cause of many of the issues that make brevity relevant. For example, some implications of the Elusive 600 are:

- ▶ **It can leak.** Others' ideas can easily pop into your mind while you are talking, and you might impulsively start sharing them.
- ▶ **It sets off triggers.** While you are either listening or speaking, a single word or an unrelated distraction can cause you to lose focus.
- ▶ **It needs to be managed.** Whether you're talking

or listening, you have the responsibility to manage your Elusive 600.



“Then I notice that I really had gotten a text from my wife, which I of course impulsively check. She tells me that there was a past-due financial aid packet I needed to send in for my daughter's college fall semester—so I have to respond, too.”

“It happens to all of us. You've got a smartphone, so people can find you no matter where you are or what you're doing,” I add, trying to excuse him.

“Right—but this time I am in a super important meeting, and we are 10 minutes into it and the agency guys start asking me questions. I get a little defensive and even nervous, because I know I haven't been listening carefully,” he admits.

“It's like getting caught in high school daydreaming when the teacher calls on you,” I sympathize.

“Right. So I try to get things back on track and apologize. I conveniently blame my wife and tell them, ‘Let's dive back in.’ “I still feel a little disconnected, but I'm committed to focusing on their plan and analysis. Then someone knocks at the door—my coworker, saying that it's really important and will only take a minute. I step out and talk to her about another project that she needs me to make a decision on. It takes 3 or 4 minutes before I cut her short,” Ed says.

At this point, it's clear how it all unraveled.

“I return and apologize yet again. Everyone says it's fine, but our momentum slows down more and gives us even less time to discuss. After talking with the team for another few minutes, I start worrying that we are not even close to finishing on time. Handling all the open issues seems like a lost battle, and I start worrying about my next meeting that was right afterward.”

“So did you reschedule with the agency?” I asked, wondering if he had realized by that point there was no way to regain their focus or expect them to talk faster.