THE FURTHER ADVENTURES OF **DOCTRINE MAN**

TEN CRINGE-WORTHY EVALUATION PHRASES

1. "One of the best… " You're not one of the best.
2. "Absolutely outstanding performance." Standard opening line. Absolutely no meaning whatsoever.
3. "… contributed immeasurably… " No one really knows what you do or how to measure it, but you did attend a lot of meetings.
4. "Can be counted on… " You generally follow orders, especially simple ones.
5. "A real winner!" You're a loner, a loser, or someone no one talks to.
6. "… at the forefront… " As a result of attending a lot of meetings, you are typically in the room when important stuff happens.
7. "… requires minimal guidance." Everything has to be explained to you, either because you're stupid or you don't listen that well.
8. "… accomplish a myriad of tasks simultaneously." You lack focus. You stick your nose in everyone else's business. You screw up a lot of shit.
9. "… a true workhorse." You're only useful in situations that involve moving heavy furniture, carrying the mortar baseplate, or burning human feces.
10. "… a consummate team player." You're the last one picked for everything.

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A few years ago, Doctrine Man published a popular list that "decoded" officer evaluation reports (OERs). The sad thing about his humorous jab at OERs, though, is that it wasn't too far off from reality. Generally speaking, we in the military don't always do a great job of giving folks the cold hard truth about their performance. Many leaders spend the majority of their career with an inflated view of themselves and do not give adequate attention to those areas in which they need improvement. When we fail to provide subordinates with negative feedback, their professional growth is left up to chance; as a result, we see toxic and weak leaders rise through the system, thus damaging the effectiveness of the overall Army.

As a 2014 article from the Harvard Business Review points out, honest and candid feedback is uncomfortable and not that easy to give. But it doesn't need to be.

In his book *Stop Talking and Start Communicating*, Geoffrey Tumlin provides us with the following guidelines for sitting down and having those tough conversations:

- **Have a simple message and provide examples.** Telling someone that they are a weak staff officer, bad platoon leader, or an underperforming NCO doesn't really help the situation and doesn't provide them with specific things that they can work on improving. Negative feedback should open the door for solutions. Give subordinates specific examples of areas in which they are failing. For example, instead of telling

someone they aren't that great at public speaking, point out the specific issues you've witnessed when they talk in front of a group. Tumlin emphasizes that, "A simple, specific message with an example or two to illustrate the problematic behavior will help you achieve your conversational goal."

- **Discuss the incident or behavior, not the person**. Avoid telling people what they *are* (poor leader, hothead, dirtbag, dishonest) and focus the conversation on what they *did* or *did not do* (late to meetings or formations, failed to plan, interrupts people).

- **Separate intentions from perceptions**. The quickest way to make a subordinate's defenses go up is to make an assumption about their intentions. Everyone has blind spots, and they may not realize that their actions (with good intentions) are being perceived in a different light by others. An NCO might think they are being helpful in meetings by bringing up issues no one else thought of, but to everyone else in the room, they come across as a know-it-all. Tumlin recommends using the phrase, "You probably didn't intend for X, but that's how I perceived it."

- **Don't dilute your message with a pile of positive statements.** Because giving negative feedback is hard to do, sometimes we feel the need to soften the blow by throwing some positive statements into the conversation. Avoid making comments like, "LT Smith, you've missed every deadline I've assigned you… but your PowerPoint slides are always right on the mark!" Adding a bit of positive feedback into a conversation where the goal is to address a negative incident or behavior only sends mixed signals to the person on the receiving end.

- **Don't worry if the initial conversation is short.** Avoid spending additional time addressing other topics or letting your mouth run. This has the potential to add white noise to your message and further dilutes the impact on the person receiving the feedback. Consider scheduling a follow-up conversation so that the individual has time to think about the behaviors you have addressed and can develop their own solution before you discuss the problem again.

Giving negative feedback is no easy task, but it's imperative that we provide our subordinates with an honest assessment of their performance so that they have the opportunity to grow as leaders within the profession of arms. While it may feel better in the short term to avoid those uncomfortable conversations, in the long term, we do a disservice to those we lead, our organizations, and our Army.

Below are a few links for further reading on effectively providing feedback:

[Stop Pretending that You Can't Give Candid Feedback](#)

[12 Tips for Effectively Counseling Your Subordinates by the Military Leader](#)

[Counseling Training for New Leaders by CompanyCommand.mil and PlatoonLeader.mil](#)

[Turning Performance Counseling into a Conversation](#)

[The Assumptions That Make Giving Tough Feedback Even Tougher](#)

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