



By Joe Byerly

When it comes to intentionally developing our subordinates, one of the greatest tools in a leader's kit bag is one-on-one counseling. Unfortunately, counseling is hit or miss across the Army. I would argue that the majority of officers and NCOs receive formal performance counseling only a handful of times over the course of their careers, leaving inflated officer and non-commissioned officer evaluation reports as their only source of professional feedback. When we don't provide subordinates with 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.

I personally witnessed the power of counseling as I watched a young officer transform from an unproductive and poor leader into a highly effective one in a just a few short months. All it took was a commander who was willing to take the time and sit down with him to have an open and honest dialogue. The commander's commitment to that individual helped him become a stronger platoon leader, and in turn improved the performance of the platoon and the company.

As a lieutenant, I only received formal feedback once or twice outside of my initial counseling sessions with my commanders. Because of this lack of feedback, I believe I

missed great opportunities for professional growth early on in my career. Once in command, I made it a habit of setting aside time on my calendar to counsel all of the officers and NCOs that I rated. But like most leaders, I look back on my time in command with more than a few regrets. I wish I would have taken my counseling sessions beyond sustains and improves, and turned them into conversations.

Thankfully, one of my former platoon leaders, who eventually became my HHT commander when I was a S3, developed a quarterly counseling program built on trust, reflection, and quality conversations. To begin with, he let his subordinates know up front what to expect when sitting down by providing them with an outline of the conversation before they ever step into his office:

1. *My general perceptions of you as a Leader.*
2. *A discussion of key areas in which you are performing well.*
3. *A discussion of key areas in which you need to improve your performance.*
4. *My assessments of your values (satisfactory or unsatisfactory), performance, and potential (stated with respect to that of an “average” leader of your rank and experience.)*
5. *A discussion of your future priorities.*
6. *Your assessment of our organization.*
7. *Your feedback to me on my leadership style and performance.*

As you can see with the outline, he let them know they know the focus of the counseling. This gave them time to reflect and prepare for the conversation.

He also went beyond the outline, providing them with reflection questions that shaped the conversation:

1. *What do you perceive as your three primary strengths and weaknesses?*
2. *What are the aspects about this organization that you dislike the most? Like the most?*
3. *How can we improve our organization?*
4. *What causes you to waste the most time? What do I do, that causes you to waste the most time?*
5. *Outline three times since our last counseling when you took smart risks that resulted in a “failure”. (I will choose one with you to discuss further.) To what do you attribute this “failure?” What lessons did this experience provide you as you undertake future risks? How did you help others to learn from your risk? What could I have done to help this risk deliver better results?*

6. *Outline three times you have substantively disagreed with me since our last counseling. (I will choose one with you to discuss further.) Why did you feel you needed to object to my statement or action? Did your disagreement result in making the unit more combat ready? Why or why not? What did you learn from this event?*
7. *What are you doing for your own self-development?*
8. *What are your personal and professional goals for the rest of this rating period? For the next year? Five years? Have you organized your life to achieve these goals?*
9. *Assess my performance as your boss. Describe three of my weaknesses. Describe three of my strengths. What bothers you most about my Leadership style? What is most effective characteristic about my Leadership style?*

These questions serve several purposes. First, they drive the subordinate to reflect on his/her experiences. Reflection is an important part of the learning process because it is how we make sense of and better understand our past experiences. Second, they reinforce behaviors that the commander wants his subordinates to adopt: self development, risk-taking, and honest discourse. Finally, the questions make the individual assess the organization and the commander, two important elements the commander needs to know in order to remain effective.

Finally, he provided individuals with guidelines for these counseling sessions:

1. *This session is not designed to make you feel good about yourself. It is designed to help you improve your performance and therefore feel good about yourself.*
2. *My present duty is to evaluate your performance and potential. We are here to discuss that evaluation. It is okay to disagree. I may not be accurate in my assessment, but keep in mind that it is my assessment. Part of the reason for meeting face-to-face is that it allows you a chance to help me refine my assessment.*
3. *Try to think and talk dispassionately about your performance and potential - almost as if we were talking about a third person.*
4. *Whining is not allowed. If you don't know, I will tell you when you are whining.*
5. *Graduate level leaders listen to counseling and use it as they approach the future. Amateurs leave counseling sessions bitching about their boss. Decide to which group you wish to belong and act accordingly.*

There are a few things you should know about this counseling program in order to make it work:

- **Trust is a prerequisite-** Without trust, a subordinate may not honestly communicate their observations about themselves, the organization, or the leader who is responsible

for the counseling.

- **It takes time**- A leader has to be willing to set aside time to invest in their subordinate's growth. Additionally, subordinates need time to reflect on their experiences in order to contribute quality dialogue to the conversation.
- **It takes two**- In order to make this an effective catalyst for professional growth, both the leader and subordinate have to be open to feedback. They should also be willing to make the necessary changes required to become a more effective leaders.

As leaders, we owe it to ourselves, our subordinates, and the Army to provide those that work for us feedback on their performance and to help coach them through the process. My hope is that this post will make you think about your counseling program, and if you don't have one, you will immediately take the steps to create one.

Finally, here are a couple of additional resources to look into for ideas on turning counseling into a conversation:

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

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

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